Sevens

9 - The Ninth Generation was a Former Child Prodigy

Wai

Prologue

Beim's Labyrinth Subjugation.

When we returned from that large job, the chilly air was beginning to warm up.

My breath was still white in the mornings, but when the sun rose higher, that stopped being the case.

I felt that spring was on its way, as I opened the window of the inn we were making use of…

… And shut it immediately.

"It's still too cold for that."

The one to watch and make fun of my actions, was the one staying over in the same room as me, the automaton Monica.

She was a woman with blond twin tails, and today as well, she operated in her maid uniform, carrying out various sorts of housework around me.

She wouldn't compromise on that at all.

But only her mouth was unsatisfactory.

"You tried to direct a scene of a refreshing morning, only to reel back from the cold… as expected of my Chicken Dickwad. I'd like to air the room, so won't you leave it open? Ah, wash your face first. I've prepared clothing for you already."

As always, her work was perfect.

I took a glance at the garments she'd prepared, and extended a hand to them to change.

"Please wash your face first."

She pointed towards the washroom, and smiled at me.

It was an inn of Beim, and while it cost a pretty penny, its facilities were in order. Quite a few adventurers made use of it, it seems, but other than that, the merchants dropping by the city often stayed here as well.

We've been using it quite often since we first came to Beim.

But as adventurers, relying too much on such an inn was also a problem. The lodging costs weren't to be underestimated, after all.

My party, me included, had nine members.

Me.

Magician with a side ponytail Novem.

Spear-wielding warrior Aria.

Support specialist, bespectacled, petite Clara.

Having manifested a Skill recently, trap specialist Miranda.

Demon eye holder, but with no other redeeming factors, Shannon.

Elf singer and skilled archer Eva.

Divine beast taking on human form May.

And finally, toxic maid automaton Monica.

With all members besides me being female, how biassed a party it must be.

When I quietly headed towards the washroom door, Monica spoke.

"You're young, so you can't be using hot water. Cold water will wake you up in a jiffy. Because you'll be heading to the guild today."

I splashed water on my face. Ah, cold again, I thought.

I wiped my face with a towel, and looked at what sleep had done to my hair. My blue hair was ruffled, and I'd have to set it.

(But that can wait.)

Or so I thought, as I walked outside to find Monica lying in wait with a brush in hand. Besides the brush, she was also holding what looked to be a badly made gun.

“W-what are you doing? And why do you have a weapon on you?”

When I retreated a step, Monica was amazed.

“Weapon? It’s just a dryer. Have you never seen one before? Well, we’ve only just returned, and I haven’t had the chance to use it. I didn’t have one in stock, but having upgraded to Full Option Monica… there is nothing I cannot do, damn chicken!”

She motioned me to sit, so I quietly took a seat. The gun muzzle let out a warm wind, and Monica went into setting my hair.

“How is it? That’s all it takes for this high-class tool to get even the worst of bedhead in order!”

She said that simply brimming with confidence.

“… Wouldn’t taking a shower, and drying it off accomplish the same?”

When I said that, Monica muttered, ‘once more, this man just doesn’t get it,’ as she shook her head to the side.

The setting ended, and I changed clothes before exiting the room, and going down to the first floor. It was where the inn had its dining hall, and where one could eat breakfast.

When I descended the stairs, I found I had come just as Novem was eating her meal.

“Did you just get here?”

“Yes, Lyle-sama. Would you care to join me?”

The one inviting me over, was a member of the same party, as well as my former fiancée. I heeded Novem’s invitation, and joined her for breakfast.

Bread and soup, and even salad. Quite an extravagant meal.

There were even thinly cut strips of bacon, and the place was quite delicious relative to its price.

I ate as I told Novem of the day's plan.

"Today, we'll go to the guild, to verify what sort of requests they have for us. We've only just returned, so I hope there's a good amount of time to the next one."

The guild we were affiliated with was an unpopular one known as the East Branch.

It was a guild that mainly dealt with outside requests, and it was quite often it would dispatch its adventurers to other lands.

Because with this being the city of adventurers, there were plenty of requests streaming in from foreign soil. The adventurers wishing for such requests would enroll there.

Of course, no one wanted to take on troublesome jobs. To compensate for that, the east branch had its own special collateral to be had.

The eastern guild branch was prioritized when the profitable requests known as【Labyrinth Subjugations】were sent around.

And to earn the right to take them on, the adventurers of the east branch would continue to process the requests sent down to them.

Novem finished her meal, and courteously wiped her mouth with a table napkin before responding.

"It's important to take on normal requests as well. But perhaps a little more rest would be best. The majority of the party has only just undergone Growth, so suddenly charging into battle would present a high chance of error."

In our last Labyrinth Subjugation, most of our members had invited on Growth. A Growth that elevated one's physical abilities… the reason it was so dangerous, lay in how after overcoming a wall in specs, the people concerned would often then go on to push themselves too far beyond that.

There are loads of adventurers who've failed after trying to do the impossible post-Growth.

"We can use that as a reason to go testing out our abilities a bit around Beim. Right… maybe we should go challenge Beim's own Labyrinth. Even if we don't go down too deep, it could serve a good warmup."

It's not like the adventurers of the east branch couldn't go off and challenge Beim's managed Labyrinth.

But they did kindly recommend you don't concentrate on it.

Clearing it wasn't permitted. The managed Labyrinth was said to even reach a hundred floors down. No one's been able to confirm that one, but reaching its depths has even been said to be impossible.

Novem addressed me.

"I'll leave that area to you. You planned to go with Aria-san today, right?"

Hearing Aria's name, I let out a sigh.

It's not like I hated her or anything. But when it came to these sorts of dealings… no, I won't go that far, but when it came to confirming requests at the guild, taking her along wasn't much help.

She was quite reliable in battle, but using her head was not her specialty.

(Well, we have Novem, Miranda, and Clara, and they're the ones who usually take up the thinking tasks.)

Even so why choose to take Aria along?

It was simple.

From the blue Jewel hung at my neck, I heard a voice.

『Don't make such a face, Lyle. You have to teach Aria about jobs like these, or she'll be truly troubled someday. You can't let her become a beast girl who only knows how to fight.』

Beast girl was the common classification of her among the ancestors recorded in my Jewel.

She was capable, but because of the outstanding environment she was thrown into, it couldn't help but seem she was falling short.

And where the other party members could easily complete jobs, she couldn't help but look awkward.

The Third let his voice.

『She has the motivation, and she has the talent. I won't say to take it slowly, but she really has to be trained up. In various ways.』

On his tone that seemed full of hidden implications, I resisted the urge to respond.

I spoke to Novem

"Well, I'll teach her this and that. And if I keep taking everyone else but her along, I'm pretty sure she'll get mad."

Novem laughed to herself.

"Something wrong?"

"No, it's just… I'm only relieved you're worrying for Aria-san's sake."

Hearing that from her…

(I can't say I'm just doing it because the ancestors told me to.)

I began to feel quite guilty.

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Beim's eastern guild branch.

When we brought our feet to the guild we had set as our home, it was as lively as ever.

An uninterrupted line of adventurers streamed in and out, and despite how wide the lobby had been constructed, it was filled to the

brim with adventurers waiting their turn.

A number of receptionists lined the counters, handling their needs.

Perhaps Aria was mindful of the curling tips of her red hair, as she was stroking her ends with the tips of her fingers.

We got in line, and had some free time until our turn came around.

Aria's fingers parted from her cuticles, and she looked around.

"Hah, there sure are a lot of them here around this time of day. If you wanted to come for work, you should've come here much earlier. It takes quite a while once it gets crowded."

Inside my head.

(It's probably best I keep quiet about how it was Aria's preparations delayed us into rush hour. That's something I've come to understand as of late.)

While it was her responsibility for sleeping in, it's not like we were in a hurry this time, or anything.

We were only here to confirm what sort of requests they had..

So I inclined my ears to my surroundings, to pick up a rumor or two.

Rumors among adventurers.

They weren't all credible information sources, but just listening to them was of no loss to me.

"Are the talks about how that Alette is going to get married true?"
"Haha, no way. She's just returning to her country earlier than planned."
"Flaminia-chan from the flower shop sure was pretty today. I think I'll buy sommore flowers on the way back."
"… You didn't hear? Flaminia-chan's getting married next week, it seems."
"… That… can't… be."
"I just heard, but it looks like Zayin and Lorphys are going to go at it again."

“They’ve always been glaring at one another regardless. But they have their own selection of mercs over there, so it’s irrelevant over here. Even if they called over, only the South Branch would be getting worked up.”
“Don’t you have any stories of that Albano bastard getting injured or anything? Or perhaps making a slip-up in the Labyrinth?”
“As if that Albano would make a mistake like that. If he really was injured, then just how many people do you think would be at the bars rejoicing right around now?”

They were all stories without much a connection to me.

At most, I learned that there were many adventurers desiring for harm to come Albano-san’s way.

From the Jewel, the Seventh let his voice.

『Hmm, they can only develop a means of operation that invites in such hatred towards themselves. That’s why I hate adventurers and mercenaries.』

I decided to let that opinion of his go in one ear, and out the other. And wait, he just plainly hated adventurers and mercs, and all his opinions on them seemed to come solely from emotion.

I heard a calmer Fifth’s voice.

『But whatever the generation, the rumors don’t change too much. Of love, and war, it isn’t so much different from my time at all.』

The Fourth laughed as he spoke.

『Even when it looks like it’s changed, it’s still the same in essence… that’s a bit interesting. Is this sentiment the special privilege of us recorded souls?』

I listened to the voices of the Jewel, and the surrounding voices as I waited my turn.

As the adventurers in front of us reduced, the counter grew closer.

It seems the one in charge of us this time would be Marianne-san.

(Oh? How rare.)

Marianne-san was a guild receptionist usually charged with taking care of newbie adventurers. I found it a little odd to see her handling a normal receptions desk.

❼

Our turn came around, and we sat down across Marianne-san to confirm the requests.

She already knew about me, it seems.

“Good work on the Labyrinth Subjugation. And these are the sorts of requests we’d like you to take on this time.”

She passed over some documents, but there were more than usual.

Aria sitting beside me spoke.

“Hey, isn’t that a bit much? Are you going to take up all of them?”

I picked one of the sheets up, and denied that statement.

“No way. It’s from here we’ll decide the requests we’ll accept. If the travel distance is short, we’ll have to accept a number of them. But too far will cost some time. So I’d like to consult with the others after we get back, but… there sure are a lot this time.”

Marianne-san shrugged her shoulders. The reason her large chest looked as if it was bouncing must be the fault of that modified uniform of her’s.

When my eyes ended up wandering towards them, Aria stepped on my foot.

“Ow! What is it?”

“You were being rude, so I cautioned you.”

Said Aria as she averted her eyes. I endured the pain on the top of my foot as I turned my eyes back to the documents.

Marianne was smiling a bit.

What was presented to me was an all-encompassing list of the available requests, but there were five full pages of them. A few of them had been crossed through to indicate there was already a party that'd accepted them.

(They've been crossed off starting with the most favorable ones. I guess it's only natural.)

I looked over the list, and sought confirmation with Marianne-san again.

"Isn't it longer than usual?"

"It's right after a Labyrinth subjugation, and there are quite a few parties that aren't troubled for money at present. And there are also ones with comrades experiencing Growths, that can't move around as they please. On top of that, a new pioneering corps has been formed, so they're also seeking manpower. We have more requests than we can digest. There's this and that at the main branch, and receptionists are being recalled, so even I've been placed on standard duty. Ah…"

Remembering something, Marianne-san asked me.

"Has Erhart-kun's party picked a quarrel with you since them? They're rash children, but good at heart. Their mindset of solving things with power is too prevalent that I can't help but worry."

Aria beside me heard the man's name, and made a face as if she just recalled them.

"That guy with the large sword, and tank top? Come to think of it, I haven't met him since."

While Aria hadn't met him, I'd seen his face a few times at the guild.

Whenever we met, he would make a displeased expression, but he would soon go off somewhere else.

"Not really. Though it seems he still hates me."

Marianne-san made a bitter smile.

“I see. I’m cautioning him on my end, but… Now then, what shall you do? You can pick up a relatively favorable request now. Or will you take the documents with you, and deliberate?”

I told her I’d take it back, and left the counter.

❼

… Guild headquarters.

The ones gathered were the staff members of higher status from each branch.

Sweeper Tanya… Tahnia was to accompany them as a guard.

The headquarters’ meeting room was too vast to even compare to the ones at the branches.

One of the top brass informed the personnel gathered of the contents of the meeting.

“To refresh you all on the current problem, skirmishes have already broke out on the border of Zayin and Lorphys. That happens every year, and it’s nothing rare, but it came with bad timing, and things are blowing up sky high.”

Everyone’s eyes turned towards the receptionists of the East Branch.

What Alette Baillet… a knight of Lorphys got her hands on was a rare metal known as mithril.

And that was about to become the trigger for war.

But those here didn’t really care about the war in itself.

The problem lay in how it would affect the guild.

A man from the South Branch raised his hand, and declared.

“At the South Branch, a number of mercenary brigades have already

begun to move. Equipment and food stuffs, consumable expenditure will also increase, surely."

A female staff of the North Branch.

"A war in this season? How troublesome. Because we hadn't anticipated it, there'll be quite a ruckus over changing plans. So will war really break out?"

A West Branch receptionist laughed a little.

"It's true that it's only a rumor. But this generation's Holy Maiden loves her share of war. The high priests seem like they'd be for it as well."

Tahnia's superior looked over the documents in his hand with displeasure.

In a small voice.

"Good grief, even when we've only just gotten them from the Labyrinth, we're going to run through our stock of Magic Stones. Even though when the adventurers get busy with war, the price of Magic Stones rises."

Even if the price of Magic Stones rose, each guild would be obligated to buy them regardless, or so he complained.

The top brass passed down the guild's policy on the matter.

"As we always have, the guild will be assisting both camps. We will accept both requests, but there's something called balance. Without any excessive support, we'll be moving so as not to put the guild at a loss."

Tahnia thought.

(And that's the hard part. A wrong move, and it'll be troublesome when a country gets destroyed.)

A receptionist of the West Branch raised his hand, and asked.

"So what's the scale the guild anticipates it'll climb up to?"

Scale.

On both sides, only the skirmishes of local lords, with a scale of thousands?

Or would the countries seriously try to mobilize their people, fighting with tens of thousands on the battlefield?

If it were just some disputes with a few hundred soldiers, those normally existed everywhere without the guild intervening.

With only a few dozen fighting, they weren't even possible to report.

Zayin and Lorphys weren't the only countries out there.

The top brass.

"Zayin just underwent a change in leadership, and that new head's sure to move some tens of thousands. According to the merchants, they've already started amassing goods to that extent. In contrast, Lorphys' movements are dull. They fall short in national power on a fundamental level. Lorphys' land will likely become the battlefield."

The guild anticipated Lorphys would be fighting a defensive battle.

Tahnia anticipated the country to be laid waste to.

She had conversed a number of times with Alette over the receptions desk, and she knew she wasn't a bad person.

(… Alette-san is going to hurry back home, isn't she.)

As a single acquaintance, she didn't want her to die, but with reality as it was, the guild was going to use Alette's homeland's strife as a source of profit.

Without her expression falling apart, Tahnia quietly watched over the meeting.

1 - Letter

The one waiting for me when I returned to the inn was Alette-san.

She belonged to the knight brigade of a small country known as Lorphys, but was the captain of a force carrying out a strange tradition of training in Beim.

I've even heard rumors she was promised the position of vice commander once she returned home.

And such a person had dropped by to visit me.

"… I never thought we'd meet again so soon."

When I said that with a dubious expression, she gave a smile that seemed to have extra shadows looming in it, and dropped her shoulders.

"Same goes for me. I know we both need a little more time between us. But I have to talk to you now, no matter what."

Alette-san had come by the inn with her trusty adjutant.

When I tried to confirm the details, she invited us out for a meal.

"… Anyways. Could you free up some time? I do feel sorry for this, but I can't help but be busy right now. I'll treat you all at dinner."

The one dealing with her was Miranda.

She sat in a chair, crossed her legs, looked at me, and nodded.

(So my decision on the matter is fine. I'd better tell her about how much May eats.)

If we were just going to listen to what she had to say, it shouldn't really be a problem.

"We'll gladly accept a meal. But one of our members has quite an appetite. I recommend you resolve yourself for the bill."

As I said we'd listen to her, Alette-san seemed relieved.

"That's a big help. Well, we all have our appetites, be we adventurers or knights. There's a restaurant I happen to like, so I'll treat you there. The matter at hand is about the same congratulations I offered you before. But we aren't so rushed on that one. Our main objective is about a letter of introductions. Well then, we'll send someone to get you in the evening."

A letter of introduction? To whom? I thought, but there was one person that seemed to fit the terms.

Alette-san left the inn, and Miranda stood from her seat to come over to me.

I had headed to the guild with Aria, but she noticed I had returned alone.

"I'll notify the other members about the dinner matter. More importantly, weren't you with Aria?"

I had taken Aria to the guild to teach her about it, but on the way back, she had gone off to retrieve some equipment, so she would be returning a little later.

"Her equipment was scheduled to be done today, so she went off to pick it up. If she came with me back to the inn, she'd have to go out again."

After hearing that, Miranda looked towards the door Alette had exited through.

"I think this is probably about professor Damien. If it's a letter of introduction from you, Lyle, then perhaps he might show some interest. Will you write one up?"

My acquaintance that Alette-san seemed interested in was a professor at Arumsaas' academy known as Damien Valle.

He was an odd ball known as one of the academy's seven great.

In fact, he was the one to get Monica operational after excavating her from the Labyrinth.

And at present, it was widespread knowledge that he had used his golem magic to develop the baggage carrier golem【Porter】.

To be more precise, I had been the main developer, but Damien was the one who taught me the magic, and consulted with me on the matter, so it was something of a joint venture.

“Porter is convenient, after all. Since she’s attached to a knight brigade, I guess she can’t help but want a unit. I did deny teaching her, so…”

Seeing my atmosphere become gloomy, Miranda gave a bitter smile. She crossed her arms, and leaned a little of her weight to the table in front of her.

“Hey, it was the right decision, wasn’t it? Spreading the information to become rich would be nice, but I honestly doubt its viability for our end goal. So will you write up a letter?”

From the Jewel hung around my neck, I heard the aloof voice of the Third Generation Head.

『How about writing one to get her in your debt? And get her to pass on that matter with Monica, and what’s happened up to now… it’s thinkable that Celes may become interested in Damien, so it’s best you put him on his guard while you can.』

The latter half of that was said in an earnest voice.

I gripped the Jewel to signify my agreement on the matter.

“I’ll write one. I want to inform him of this and that. As his former student, is there anything you want to pass along?”

Miranda laughed.

“I doubt he even remembers my name. That’s the sort of man the professor is. Now then, I’ll go notify the others. To leave their evenings open.”

I saw her off as she headed up the stairs, and began thinking up what to tell Damien.

(Write a letter of introductions, and… yeah, I can't leave Celes out of it. And what I learned in the Labyrinth. Perhaps he'll be able to give some insight?)

Recalling the words of the automaton who named herself Monica's sister, I began writing to Damien.

❼

The dinner Alette-san treated us to was good in both quantity, and quality.

She reserved a room, and perhaps to thank everyone for the success of the Labyrinth Subjugation, her subordinates were there as well.

With the place rented out, we were able to talk about quite a few things.

I also met with the knights who would be leaving for Arumsaas.

As we were returning back to the inn, Monica carried a sleeping Shannon over her back. She walked over to my side, and made a rare request.

"Chicken dickwad, once we return, I will plead something to you with upturned eyes, so please listen to my request."

As she said that, she looked quite reluctant. I looked around.

May looked satisfied as she talked with Aria about the meal. Which one was good? Ah, I didn't get to try that one! I heard that sort of conversation.

Eva was asking Miranda about the events in Arumsaas, and taking memos.

Clara was talking to Novem.

The road back was still cold once night sent in, and I looked at them, and thought.

(Are they getting along better than before?)

I returned my eyes to Monica, and decided to see what I could do.

“If it’s within a feasible scope. Well then, what is your request?”

Monica supported up Shannon’s body with one hand, as she used the other to produce a black, small, and slender board from the pockets of her apron.

“… What’s that?”

“A memory stick. It’s loaded with information readable by automatons. Could you put it in the letter, in a way he’s sure to notice?”

When I took it, she shifted Shannon back to both her hands.

What I took in my hand looked like a smooth and small plank.

“It’s probably best I hand it over through a different route. It’s Damien we’re talking about here. Perhaps he won’t even check the contents of the letter of introduction. I’ll write another letter, and put it in there.”

I’ll leave it with the knights headed for Arumsaas, and ask them to deliver it as well.

But there was something I found a bit curious.

“Contents automata can read… weren’t you at odds with the three units at Damien’s place?”

Was there something you wanted to say so late into the game? When I thought that, she made a serious expression far removed from her normal one.

“… Of how I met our sisters, and of how I, Monica, am reaching my final perfect form, I only mean to brag of it to them. Of, this isn’t just any boast, mind you. I’ve recorded what happened back then in detail, so it overlaps with your intentions.”

“You’ve been especially ill-natured as off late. But alright, I’ll put it in the letter.”

Even if it was just the braggings of an automaton, there wasn't anything to be lost in sending it over. And wait, I thought.

(Monica… those three at Damien's place are the only ones of her kind we know of still operating in the world, aren't they. I wonder if she feels lonely.)

I carefully put the black board away in my pocket, and continued down the road back.

❼

The next day.

I gathered everyone, and went over the requests we would be taking. And when everyone dispersed, Clara remained in my room.

Clara Bulmer was a temporary worker at Arumsaas' library. What's more, she had a beneficial Skill towards that job.

Novem and Miranda were both present, and Monica brought in some tea.

With her deep blue hair, Clara held her staff as if to embrace it. Her drowsy eyes were usually half closed, but she was giving a sharp stare, narrowing them even further.

Her red eyes looked as if they were glowing, and it felt as if her entire body was glowing as she stood in the center of the room.

To Clara's final stage Skill【Walking Library】, I posed a question.

"A question regarding the vile courtesan the led the kingdom of Sentras to its ruin three hundred years ago."

"Yes. There are numerous theories, but she was a woman that made her appearance in the closing years of the Sentras kingdom, and it has been recorded that she has enamored many a man. At present, she is thought of as a single product of the internal decadence of the kingdom before its collapse."

More indifferent than usual, Clara responded in a voice without a hint

of emotion. And her will itself wasn't in it.

Even when it was her own Skill, she was unable to put it to effective use on her own.

And that was what Clara thought of as her defect.

"The one to defeat her was the first king of Bahnseim, correct?"

On my question, Clara indifferently…

"According to the recorded documents, and stories, such has been registered. But one portion of them suggests that the existence of another party has a relation to the matter."

… Yes, that much was common knowledge. The problem is what's to come.

"How did the first king of Bahnseim defeat the beautiful courtesan? How did he fight the kingdom of Sentras?"

When I asked two questions, Clara closed her eyes. And she opened them again.

"The internal decadence had worsened, and the future king, who was but a provincial lord at the time sought out the assistance of those around him, or so the records have left. Even now, many of those in power are the descendants of those that lent their power to the king. However, while the result of said courtesan being defeated remains, no such data has been recorded towards the means."

Having read anything she could find that looked remotely like a book, Clara had read through almost all the books in the giant library of Arumsaas.

And every time she found a new book, she would read it without fail.

There were some books she was prevented from reading, but those were the ones forbidden for anyone to browse.

Novem sitting on the sofa looked down a bit, and put her hand to her chin. She seemed to be thinking of something.

On the other hand, Miranda was sitting on my bed, and she posed a

question to Clara.

“Is it that it was never recorded how she was defeated? Or that Clara has simply never read such a thing?”

On that query, Clara disinterestedly…

“The possibility exists. But Clara Bulmer has used her Skill to read between eighty and ninety percent of the great library of Arumsaas. Conclusion: in the extent that a civilian can read, there are no further records to be found.”

After saying that much, Clara began acting strange.

I stood from my seat, walked over to her side, and supported up her shoulders.

“That’s the end of it. Let Clara lie down and sleep.”

Monica placed a pillow on the room’s sofa, and I lay Clara down. She was small, and lifting her up wasn’t much trouble at all.

“Now then, do you think there is no record of that courtesan’s defeat, or perhaps there wasn’t a need to record it to begin with… which do you think?”

On my question, Miranda crossed her legs.

“Who knows? Well, even if she seduced men the same way as Celes, I can’t say her skill level is greater or lesser than the woman of the time. Personally, I can’t make a decision.”

Novem looked at me.

“I think the queen who carried out her heinous acts must have been skilled as well. We’ve confirmed the extent of her actions last we had Clara use her Skill. To accomplish all of that, it’s definite that she had a level of ability of her own.”

Cruel and extreme. It was as if the beautiful courtesan quite literally walked her way up on a road of blood.

We confirmed it with Clara’s walking library, but her actions were the same as Celes’… no, even greater.

The unnerving stories that came from Clara's mouth made me want to cut her off part-way.

But there were many unknown spots in regards to her abilities.

Whether she had a technology to turn people's heads strange, or she was doing it herself, or if she had her subordinates carry it out… the details of it all would change by the book, and Clara's Skill was unable to affirm anything.

What was certain…

"The way to beat her was never passed down. If it was due to a lack of need, then that's well and good, but this does feel quite contrived."

I felt like complaining to the Bahnseim King who didn't leave behind such information.

But within the Jewel, the ancestors were also raining him with jeers.

『Useless, right? This is why you can't trust people of the royal line.』

『It sure is suspicious. At the very least, the end of the woman who put so many people through hell… it wouldn't be strange at all for such a things to remain. Of how she was defeated, or perhaps she could have even been tortured for it all. Or could it be that the one who did it used their own life, so nothing could be…』

『It couldn't be written down, or they simply didn't. Whichever the case, perhaps there's something they wanted to bury up. Most nobles have something like that, more or less. When it goes all the way up to the royal line, anything is possible. 』

『The Bahnseim king of the time defeated her, as a representative of the lords who participated in the conquest, or so I learned… well, none of those concerned are alive anymore, so is the truth buried in darkness?』

『How useless.』

On the Seventh's useless statement, the Third offered a revision.

『You’re not talking about Clara-chan, right? The useless ones are the royalty, right? Right?』

The Seventh sounded a little troubled.

『O-of course.』

And responded as such.

(I thought to use some precedent as a model for taking Celes down, but I guess it won’t be that easy.)

Seeing Clara fast asleep from using her Skill, I put my hand to my head, and began thinking up a different means.

2 - Chivalry

Having brought myself over to the guild, I took Novem with me today.

We had decided what requests we would take on as a party, but there was a possibility they would already have been taken up by other parties.

But that doesn't mean we could just bring the list back and talk about it again every time. We would see which ones we could take, and if our choices were taken, we had some backup candidates, but if those were gone as well, I'd consult with Novem on what requests she saw as preferable.

(With Aria, I can't really bring myself to rely on her for decisions in that field.)

I'm not trying to speak ill of her, but at present, her hands were full with taking care of herself. She didn't seem to have the leisure to think of our other comrades, and deciding matters like these was more suited to Novem and Miranda.

Perhaps Clara was the runner-up?

The place was congested as usual, but we had come early in the morning, so it was on the lesser side.

Looking around, I spotted some adventurers who'd worked alongside us in the Labyrinth Subjugation. Among them was a certain adventurer I didn't really want to meet.

"Geh! It's the womanizer."

The one looking my way with an unpleasant expression was Erhart headed for work. He didn't have his large sword on him today, but his tank top showed no sign of changing.

(I'm pretty sure it's still cold out there.)

A little amazed, I offered a light greeting. Novem gave a small bow.

“How cruel. You look like you’re doing well.”

When I said that, Erhart stuck his chest out.

“Of course! I’ve become able to get【B】evaluations without breaking a sweat! After we save up some money, and get our equipment in order, I’ll be selected for Labyrinth subjugation, and pass you by in no time!”

Seeing his back as he took his comrades along and left, I found myself happy at his growth, for some reason.

“So he’s earnestly doing his work… he should buy a coat while he’s at it.”

When I said that, Novem smiled.

“I’m sure there are some things he won’t concede. Personally, I find that the metal protectors around his hips stand out more.”

He usually wore quite unbalanced equipment, but I didn’t see them this time around. He usually wore heavy metal guards around his hips and legs.

“Perhaps they’re unnecessary for odd jobs? But it does look like he’s doing just fine.”

I was a little relieved.

If something happened to him, it’d become harder to sleep at night.

(I did just tell Marianne-san I’d look after him, after all.)

I thought, as I spotted another sweltering acquaintance with quite a refreshing smile on his face, so early in the morning. ‘Twas Creit-san.

“Morning, Lyle-kun!”

This time, I was the one who felt like saying, ‘geh,’ but Novem offered him a courteous greeting.

“It’s been a while.”

“Hey, it’s Novem-san. You’re bringing a different woman every day, I see.”

Creit-san’s smiling face likely held no ill-intent, but those around him weren’t so. Eyes of envy and pity pierced into my stomach.

From the Jewel, the Fourth.

『It’s these oblivious sorts that bring about the worst.』

The Third laughed.

『If he were doing everything according to plan, he’d be an unpleasant one, but he isn’t that skillful. He’s a good person, I say. If you keep some distance when you keep him company, he’ll become a good comrade.』

I gave my greetings, and noticed he was wearing some rough attire. Even if I called it rough, perhaps by his personality, it was set quite neatly.

His collar was properly folded and fastened, while his clothes barely had any wrinkles.

“I think it every time I see you, but you sure are prim and proper. Not very adventurer-like.”

His smile didn’t falter.

“That so? I’m not sure whether to be happy or sad about that one. But our final goal is government service, after all.”

Come to think about it, I get the feeling I’ve heard something like that.

“Government service, is it?”

On those words, the man firmly hit his right hand against his chest.

“What’s there to hide, we’re a party that’s gathered in order to become knights! Until we find the lord we are to serve one day, we’re training ourselves up.”

I thought he was a sweltering one, but he had his own goal, and was

acting based on it. Though I get the feeling he's taking it a bit too far.

There, Creit-san looked at a clock posted in the guild.

"Oh my, I must be off. Well then, fare thee well, Lyle-kun!"

I waved my hand, as I saw him leaving with a smile.

Watching Creit-san, the Seventh spoke.

『I'll buy into his disposition, but why an adventurer of all things…』

The adventurer hater rarely gave constructive opinions when it came to these matters, so I let him be.

There, Novem called out.

"Lyle-sama, we're next."

Looking in front, I saw the adventurers at the counter get up, and leave.

(So today's receptionist it Tanya-san.)

With bob-cut hair, and glasses, she looked like a capable woman, and fitting with that appearance, her work was thorough and swift.

I brought our papers up to the counter, and offered my greetings.

"Pleasure. It's been a while."

"Yes, quite some time. What business have you come for today?"

"We're thinking to take up a request. Is this one possible?

When I pointed to one on the list, Tanya-san looked through the documents she had on hand, and thought a while.

"Another party has already taken it. Would you like to look at an updated roster? By the way, it would be exceedingly helpful if you took up this request over here."

The one she asked us to accept would take up more time than the request reward was worth.

“Isn’t that a tad harsh?”

When I said that, I saw that Tanya-san seemed to have already understood that fact.

“Yes, we think so as well, but there are some circumstances that will probe troublesome if no one accepts it. And if you take it up, we will buy off the Magic Stones you earn along the way at a comparatively higher price.”

I thought over her words, as Novem verified the sales increase.

“How much higher would that be? Also, how will this request benefit us?”

Tanya-san made a conflicted expression.

“I think around ten percent should be possible. It depends on how much you bring in, really. But about the benefit… I’ll benefit from it. Is that no good?”

She tilted her head a little to the side, and smiled. To her, Novem…

“Not at all.”

Tanya-san gave a strained laugh.

“I’ll bet. I’d refuse that one as well.”

I was a little surprised that Tanya-san was trying to push such a request onto us. But it’s a good thing I brought Novem along.

If I was alone, perhaps I’d have accepted.

Novem continued conversing with Tanya-san.

“Very well. Would it be possible to accept that one alongside this request?”

“Yes, it’s possible, but… in that case, it would be a life saver if you could complete *this* one on the return trip.”

Novem locked eyes with me, and I confirmed the contents.

(Looking at our quota, it’s going a bit over. Just completing two

would be enough. And if we take up three of them, it looks like we won't have any leisure this month.)

I spoke.

"If we take up that many, then this month will be rough. I wouldn't really want to lose rest over it."

When I said that, Tanya-san shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm sure that's how it is, but it's going to go on like this for a while."

"Eh?"

I looked at her expression, and found it quite serious. Tanya-san declared that the number of requests would increase… no, the amount of adventurers to accept them would drop.

"It isn't anything certain, but a country called Zayin, and a country called Lorphys are currently in quite a tense situation. I don't think they'll make any move for now, but even so, both camps are scraping up manpower. If handled poorly, armies in the tens of thousands range will clash, you know."

Novem spoke on those words.

"That's Alette-san's homeland, right?"

Tanya-san nodded, and began to explain.

"I've no idea if your party will have anything to do with it, but when the scale goes up that high, the adventurers will jump in one after another. The amount of requests on the market will increase, but more importantly, the amount of adventurers to accept them will go down. And naturally enough, the guild still has to process all of them."

And to process them all, the quota will likely be increased.

(Well I'll be. So there'll be more requests for a while.)

Having heard that, Novem seemed to be lost in thought.

But from the Jewel came some delighted voices.

The Third spoke.

『Hmm, a war of ten thousands, huh?』

The Fourth.

『Preparing will be a bitch. We'll need some information if we're going to have Lyle join in.』

The Fifth as well.

『Should we ride the winning horse, or aim for a turnabout… the latter will work more towards Lyle's goal of increasing his ally count.』

The Sixth denied it.

『But inning and spreading his name would be good as well. In that case, it'd become easier for people to gather around him. And Lyle has never experienced large-scale warfare before. I think it too rough to aim for a turnabout here. 』

The Seventh.

『But it's a chance nonetheless. Let's take an assertive stance on intervention. Be that as it may, without information, nothing's going to start.』

Among the ancestors, opinions converged in the direction of my participation in the war.

(… What about my opinion?)

❼

Once we returned to the inn, me and Novem explained the information we heard at the guild.

Everyone had gathered in my room, so the space felt quite narrow.

Monica prepared tea, and we sipped it as we discussed the matter.

Shannon spoke.

“… So the amount of requests we’re going to take increased? Why not just decline them?”

If that was possible, it would be so much easier. The guild itself seemed quite troubled at the fact there weren’t enough adventurers for the requests.

If we went about things as usual, I doubt they’d be satisfied with it.

More so, I wanted to get them in my favor, so I’d play along, at least to an extent.

Miranda addressed Shannon.

“And the fact that wasn’t going to happen is why we’re all here discussing it. If we’re going to accept one with little benefit this time, then what about the next? If we just keep accepting requests, we’ll be hard pressed from an income standpoint as well.”

Our income fundamentally came from rewards, and the Magic Stones and materials we found on the way.

Compared to Labyrinth Subjugation, our revenue dropped a few levels.

If you completed a number of them, then the rewards would amount to something, but there was something more I had to say.

“On top of that, in the coming war between Lorphys and Zayin… We will be participating in it as well.”

When she heard that, Eva seemed a bit interested. As I thought, she must yearn for battlefields as a minstrel.

I can’t think it would be anything fun to watch, but it’s true that hero tales are preferred by a large portion of the populace.

“Imprudent as it may be, I’m interested.”

But the divine beast May couldn’t comprehend it.

“Killing one another of the same species? I don’t get it. Well, if their numbers grew, perhaps an extension of a turf dispute?”

It was a turf dispute in itself.

Clara spoke.

“But our scope can’t be considered that much a fighting force. Even if they be of good quality, mercenary brigades must stress on numbers as well. And it isn’t certain we will make any money if we participate.”

We didn’t have the knowhow to join in and make a profit as mercenaries. But there was someone who was knowledgeable in that field.

The Fourth offered me some advice.

『Lyle, say you’ll gather information. On top of that, schedule out the requests into time intervals, and get together the necessary goods for them.』

I opened my mouth.

“Our participation in it is a definite fact. But for now, we will prioritize gathering information. The result of that intel will see off our course of action, and I was thinking to gather info as we carried out the requests.”

When I announced the verdict, Aria hesitated a bit.

“But, doesn’t that mean… if we participate in war, we’ll be fighting humans, won’t we?”

When Aria looked around her, Miranda spoke.

“If we’re going to have to experience it eventually, getting a feel for the atmosphere at least once would be preferable. But I don’t want to die a dog’s death. If I think it too reckless, I will oppose you.”

Rather than personally being against it, she seemed worried that I may take reckless actions. When I nodded, Novem opened her mouth.

“Alette-san asked that you write a letter of introduction, but perhaps you were too rash. She is sure to return to her homeland of Lorphys,

and if we end up joining Zayin's side, we will become mutual enemies."

When everyone recalled Alette-san, she wasn't one they could bring themselves to hate, so I'm sure they had their share on their minds. And she was, without a doubt, a competent one.

I can't really say she'd emerge unharmed from a battlefield. No, people walking the battlefield for the first time like us would probably make for good targets.

Monica spoke.

"Hmm, this is a little troublesome. If it were a little sooner, I could be of major assistance, but… well, as long as you have I, Monica alongside you, we'll have the strength of thousands. I'm a maid, after all!"

I scoffed.

"Then what will you do with ten thousand enemies? Even if you take on a thousand yourself, just how many would that leave? And why is it that a maid is supposed to put us at rest?"

On my questions, Monica did a single spin, and let her twin tails sway. She pinched the sides of her skirt, and lifted them to give a tidy bow.

"That's just the sort of thing a maid is. And the current me is the Full Option Version! Everything I couldn't do before has become possible!"

The only change I ever saw was how her convenient cleaning and cooking tools had multiplied.

I gave a vague reply, and looked over everyone.

"Any objections to our participation… none? Then our actions from here on will center on fulfilling the requests we've accepted. But we'll leave some members in Beim to collect information."

With nine, we could still complete requests while leaving a number behind.

There, Miranda raised her hand.

“Any ideas, Miranda?”

“Right. I’ve given work to a number of information dealers here. It was around that time that I got to know quite a skilled one. I’ll introduce you to him, Lyle.”

She said that with a smile, but her words caused me to recall.

(She said she had Novem under surveillance. So she’s investigated investigators beforehand.)

Miranda tacked something onto that.

“I also had him look into the surrounding countries. Including Bahnseim, that is. It’s fine if we take action after listening to what he has to say, isn’t it?”

I looked at her. I had a few things I wanted to say, but having said something along the lines of accepting her everything, I couldn’t really criticize her in taking action of her own accord.

(What’s more, this is definitely working towards my sake.)

If it was going to drag my feet, I would be able to caution her, but…

“Understood. I’ll meet him. And I must give my thanks. It’s just, next time, it’ll help if you consult with me beforehand.”

When I said that, the Fourth.

『Lyle, how about you foot the information bill? She’s sure to have spent quite a sum on it. That one’s your responsibility.』

I gripped the Jewel, and spoke.

“And tell me how much it cost. I’ll pay it.”

Miranda slid the hair in front of her ear back.

“Oh, then perhaps I should say a hundred gold or two.”

She said that in a joking tone.

“Fine. If it cost that much, then I’ll pay it.”

Her expression turned serious.

“I lied. But I’d like you to be firmer with these sort of dealings. I’m happy you trust me, but being too loose about it is no good.”

Thinking her quite integrous, I nodded, and confirm the sum Miranda had really paid.

The sixth spoke.

『As expected of Miranda! With this, we’ve saved the trouble of searching out an information dealer.』

There, the Fifth.

『Are you an idiot? There may be a better one out there. And we’ll need much, much more information from here on. You think one or two will be enough?』

After attaining everyone’s approval, I stood to put it to action.

(Now then, I wonder what it’ll come down to.)

I doubt it will be that convenient for me, but if I wanted to defeat Celes, then I’d have to use whatever I could.

(I can’t keep being so easy-going.)

Or so I thought.

3 - Information Dealer Rauno

“So this is the place?”

The area Miranda brought me to wasn’t near the main streets of Beim.

It looked like a place that would become quite busy once night fell, but in the middle of the day, there were few people to be found, and I couldn’t feel any vigor from it.

I walked behind Miranda, and we entered a building to find a young girl greeting us.

“Welcome. Ah, Miranda-san. Your sister isn’t with you today?”

She looked like a lovable child, but she gave off bit of a mature and calm air.

(A gnome?)

When I thought that, Miranda spoke.

“He is my lover. We’re going out with marriage as the premise.”

I felt like I would do a spit-take. The gnome girl put both her hands to her face to hide her expression.

To avoid misunderstandings, I was about to try explaining the situation…

“So this is the enemy of womankind you’ve spoken so much about. How surprising, he looks kinder than I’d imagined. Ah, Rauno-san’s in the back room again.”

Miranda nodded, and confirmed what she owed with the girl.

“Thank you, Innis. So how much will it cost me?”

The gnome called Innis informed her of the rate for her request.

“It was just checking up on rumors. Making certain of some facts,

and sniffing around recent hearsay… it'll probably run around this much?"

When she wrote out a price, it looked a little high to me. That opinion was shared by the ancestors in the Jewel, and the Fourth…

『Proficient as this place may be, if they can only do work disproportionate to the sum paid, then we have no business her. And wait, it's quite clear there aren't many employees here.』

The two known as Rauno and Innis were around, but it didn't look like they employed much personnel.

But Miranda spoke with satisfaction.

"Very well. I'll hand it to you on the way out."

There, Innis smiled. Quite delightedly.

"Thank you very much. With this, we'll finally be able to pay off the rent."

The latter part of that was definitely not something I wanted to hear from a business, so I couldn't help but end up doubting the information dealer Miranda recognized.

(Is this really alright?)

I followed behind her, and headed for a room further in.

Inside it was a man lying atop a sofa with a blanket draped over him. What's more, he reeked of alcohol.

There was ale, and light snacks on top of his table, and regardless of how high the sun was in the sky, he was soundly asleep. I turned to look at Miranda's face.

"His skills are the real deal. He maintains deadlines, and take his personality out of the picture, and you'll find no better."

He responded to her voice.

"Well sorry for having such a troublesome personality. What? Bringing a guy along this time?"

Raising the upper half of his body, the male yawning as he stretched his arms was most likely Rauno. When I greeted him, he violently cleared off the top of the table, and told us to sit.

The door opened, Innis came in, and she hurriedly wiped off the tabletop before putting some tea out on it.

And in that space of time, Rauno brought out some documents.

Miranda accepted the folder, but she handed it off to me.

“You’re not going to read them?”

“I can do that after you’ve looked through them. Read it first, Lyle.”

Being told that, I opened up the papers, while Rauno-san sleepily sat on his sofa, and looked between me and Miranda.

And…

“So the adventurer of rumor’s a customer, is he?”

Miranda narrowed her eyes, folded her legs, and looked at Rauno-san.

“Displease with something?”

“Nope, no complaints here. I treasure clients with the ability to pay. If possible, then instead of Innis, you could just hand the reward money over to me, though.”

Miranda tilted her head with a smile.

“How unfortunate. I’ve already told Innis I’d hand it to her.”

“That so.”

Rauno-san made a bit of a disappointed face as I scanned through the papers, and nodded.

(The information’s quite precise. Uncertain pieces are grouped together separately.)

From the Jewel, the Fifth looked at them through me.

『Both Lorphys and Zayin are small. Wait, haven't they shrunk some from how they were in my time?』

The Sixth spoke.

『On that scale, if they're moving ten thousand troops… it should be needlessly difficult. Did some groundbreaking new strategy come about while I was away?』

I looked at the documents, but it didn't look like there was enough territory to mobilize that many troops to begin with. An all-out war… If they collected up as much manpower as they could, then I wouldn't say it'd be impossible, but such a thing was sure to bring about internal problems.

(Zayin is bigger than Lorphys, but they don't look to be of the scale to move tens of thousands of soldiers either.)

And information on other countries were written down as well.

The nations around Beim were all small ones, at least when compared to Bahnseim. Those small countries would go at each other in small-scale conflicts, and it seems that squabble has been going on for a few hundred years.

There, the Third spoke up.

『… Ah~, so that's it. It's because they have Beim. The adventurers' capital; a place where large masses of mercenaries and adventurers exist on a regular basis. If any trouble comes up, they just gather up mercenary troops and adventurer parties from Beim.』

Hearing that, the Seventh.

『There's a possibility the guild's moving things behind the scenes, and doing quite well for itself. And it looks like it's an area where the surrounding countries won't watch quietly if any one of them starts gaining land at a rapid rate.』

He proposed that the countries in the area had such circumstances going on.

(Then is the coming war also nothing but a farce?)

When I looked at the papers with that on my mind, my head began to hurt.

The contents covering the pages were worse than I had anticipated.

Looking at my expression, Rauno-san seemed quite amused.

“What, did learning Zayin’s internal affairs disappoint you or something? There are plenty such stories rolling around this world of ours.”

I shifted my eyes from the documents to the man.

“If it was Zayin alone, then so be it. But Lorphys is just as bad, and their neighbor【Selva】’s dubious as well. Then the homes of heroines, countries【Galleria】and【Rusworth】… Each and every one of them is nothing but war, war, war.”

Rauno-san laughed.

“For a former count heir in a country as large a Bahnseim, this must look like nothing but petty skirmishes. Well, they have circumstances you won’t find in a superpower. And this is the capital of merchants and mercs. The fact that there are so many here who would make it big in a war just goes to show how many wars there are around here.”

Thinking I’d heard something I shouldn’t have, I handed the documents over to Miranda. She confirmed their contents, but her expression did not change.

It doesn’t look like she was shocked by them.

But inside the Jewel, the ancestors were starting up an uproar.

『Seriously, the hell… this is too terrible.』
『Rather than terrible, just what are they even doing?』
『Even if you got together one or two of the countries here, you don’t stand a chance against Bahnseim. We’re not even fighting on the right scale.』
『Even if you’re going to hoist one up, how many troops would they be able to put out… getting your hands on personnel somewhere,

and suppressing the surrounding powers will take too much time.』
『If you're going to do it, you'll have to subdue them all at once, or it ain't happening. But if even that won't be enough… as I thought, we'll have to get the countries around Bahnseim to move as well.』

It's true that Bahnseim was a large country, but even compared to the Weihs territory I hailed from, the countries here were smaller, and less developed.

Doing nothing but war, their landmass and populace had stagnated.

And Rauno-san quite nonchalantly just put it out that he knew my circumstances.

I looked at Miranda, but she shook her head.

(So he investigated me already.)

The adventurer of rumor. That's what he called me. I should take it an extent of information was already circling around.

The Seventh spoke.

『His personality's a problem, but his ability isn't bad. There's no loss in having connections.』

I thought a bit.

"… Could I get you to investigate more into Zayin and Lorphys?"

Rauno-san made a serious expression.

"What do you want to know? Any more info than that, and I'll have to hitch a ride there and investigate it myself. The fee will be quite high."

Miranda was still standing next to me, but she didn't give her take on the matter. She was likely leaving this case to me in its entirety.

(But that's just how skilled this man is as an information dealer, is how it is? Not just gathering, it seems he has enough competence to infiltrate.)

"You'll go there yourself?"

When I posed the question, he shrugged his shoulders, and spoke in a joking tone.

“There’s no one but me and Innis here. Give me the time and money, and I’ll be able to look up quite a bit.”

The voices from the Jewel told me the information they wanted.

I took them into account, when I spoke.

“Then Zayin’s goal, their rations and the scale of their troops. I’d like you to confirm the adventurers and mercenaries joining in on their side as well. The same goes for Lorphys. And could you look into the surrounding countries as well?”

Rauno-san opened his mouth, and after a space of silence, he shook his head.

“Oy, could it be you plan to join in the war yourself? I’m not saying you can’t, but I’ll be charging a small fortune. Even if you pick a side as a mercenary, the fee here will be much higher than your reward.”

Information quality, and amount… that’s just how much value it would have.

“Can you do it?”

Rauno-san scratched his head.

“The time period?”

“We plan to carry out guild requests for a while. We’ll be leaving some people in the city, but could you get all this done in a month’s time?”

Hearing a month, he made a doubtful expression. I knew it was physically impossible, but I wanted to see how much he’d be able to get together in that timeframe.

From the Jewel, I heard the Sixth’s voice.

『Lyle, I’m sure you already understand this, but… don’t trust this man. Don’t forget you can get information from other information dealers as well.』

I gripped the Jewel, and Rauno-san opened his mouth.

“I can get their rations and internal affairs. But the mercenaries and adventurers enlisted will change at the drop of a hat. Even if I probe into it, by the time I tell you, it’ll have risen or fallen. I’ll also say that the surrounding countries will be impossible.”

I nodded, and confirmed the fee.

Listing transport costs, lodging at the destination, and food as necessary expenses, Rauno-san began calculating it out.

The Fourth spoke.

『Yeah~ that’s a bit high. He looks skilled, but I can’t really say how skilled.』

I nodded, and officially issued the request to him. I paid the down, and filled out the paperwork. And after me and Miranda paid the previous request’s fee to Innis, we left the building.

❼

Within the Jewel.

Called in by the Sixth, I was given a battle axe… a halberd to hold.

“Um, my specialty is sabres…?”

When I said that with a troubled face, the Sixth sighed.

『Are you an idiot? You plan to continue using a sabre on a battlefield? No, if it’s you, perhaps you’d be able to pull it off… but you’ll need a weapon made right for the plains of war.』

Made right for the plains of war. Meaning I’ll have to put up a fight everyone will remember while on the battlefield.

Surrounded by enemies in full plate armor, I’m sure there will be some cases where I won’t be able to use my mass-produced sabres.

“Then how about the First’s Giant Sword, or the Second’s Bow?”

‘Not bad,’ said the Sixth, as he pushed the battleaxe onto me.

『The First’s sword isn’t bad, but that one costs too much Mana. The Second’s Bow… how to put it, that one isn’t going to be a flower on the battlefield.』

“Ah~, I see what you mean.”

While bows and magic performed wonders on the battlefield, naturally, means to block them were always prepared. And the ones who really stood out in their efforts were the ones who held up their weapons, and fought in close combat.

It would be more memorable to see a man take down five with a sword or spear, than to see him shoot five dead.

『It isn’t bad to expand your options. You know how to handle it, right?』

“I have learned the basics.”

Saying that, I took a stance. The Sixth looked over my form, and put his hand to his chin.

“You’re looking the part. Now then, start by showing me your thrust.”

I thrust out the halberd as told, and followed it up by cutting back with the axe portion.

The Sixth looked over all my movements. And after I had shown them all, he spoke.

『Not bad. But you’ve no flexibility. Right by the book, that was. Well, put in a little experience, and it’s sure to become something formidable.』

Hearing him tell me to put in some experience, I made a conflicted expression.

“You mean I should go right into fighting with this on a regular basis? No practice?”

Holding a sabre was one thing, but I couldn't help but be anxious over a halberd.

The Sixth laughed.

"What, nervous? Polearms aren't bad at all. Give's you nice reach. And a halberd can thrust as well as it can cut. You can even use it on horseback."

I took a stance, and he did as well.

Holding up the polearm gave a sense of unease I didn't feel with my usual sabre. The Sixth repeated a few thrusts, and I moved the weapon from side to side to parry them. And in the next instant, the axe portion was closing in on my stomach.

A horizontal swipe.

I jumped back to make some distance, and continued on in a defensive battle.

『What's wrong! Try swinging it dexterously like you do with that sabre of yours!』

"Even if you say it, this is too sudden to…"

The Sixth's room of memories. The scene it displayed was the yard of the mansion. By the Sixth's kick to the ground, dirt was shot onto my face.

My sight was snatched, so I tried to take distance, only to stop upon sensing a fountain behind me with the Second's【All】.

Without a word, the Sixth brought down his halberd at my face.

… When I opened my eyes, the halberd's spear portion was right in front of me.

He grinned.

『You've still got a long way to go, Lyle.』

Pulling back his weapon, he held it in one hand, and hung it over his shoulder. The man seemed quite delighted.

(Is he having fun teaching his specialized weapon? Come to think of it, the Seventh's weapon was a gun.)

He'd shot me full of holes a number of times with a weapon that had an exceedingly low number of users, a gun.

(And wait, why is it that when we're all of the same house, the ancestors all have different weapons? Like how I'm a sabre user.)

I picked up a sabre from my father's influence, but First through Seventh had free choice of their weapons. There wasn't any semblance of a fighting style passed through the ages.

The First was a giant sword.
The Second a bow.
The Third, quite plainly, a normal sword.
The Fourth, twin daggers.
The Fifth, a snake blade.
The Sixth a halberd.
And the Seventh, a gun.

The variation was all over the place.

『Is that the end of it?』

With his question, I held up the halberd.

"Not yet. At the very least, I'll get one blow off of you."

When I said that with a smile, he looked surprised at first, but he soon raised a loud laugh, and held up his halberd.

『Good spirit there! I'll take you on until you've given up!』

So I thrust out the polearm towards him.

4 - Trouble, or Goddess of Fortune?

Trouble, or Goddess of Fortune?

Grasslands spread out before me.

The sky was high, and the sun hid behind the clouds to produce an unpleasant chill on my skin.

(If the sun came out, it'd definitely be warm.)

Winter was nearing its end. I held up a spear, as I remained wary of my surroundings.

I asked May to take on quilin form, and strapped a saddle on her to practice swinging a polearm on horseback. The spear was borrowed from Aria, by the way.

"Hey, don't hit my head when you swing that thing around. If you hit my horn, I will bite you."

Watching me sit on her back, and deal with monsters, she seemed more concerned that the spear would collide with her head.

Porter was parked on a well-maintained road. Aria leaned her back to the machine as she watched over us, while Eva kept lookout.

Clara was riding on Porter's roof, looking over at us.

"I'm making sure not to, but… horseback fighting sure is hard."

I was practicing it at the Sixth's suggestion, but I didn't have a horse to begin with. There was no helping it, so I had May take on quilin form instead.

Aria sighed.

"Hey, isn't this ridiculously luxurious? Not having a horse, do riding a divine beast instead?"

Eva looked around, before agreeing with her.

“Only Lyle. And wait, why horseback? It’s storybook hero standard fare, so I’ve not any complaints, though.”

Aria seemed amazed as she looked at Eva.

“That’s your problem? You’re just going to ignore the fact he’s seriously preparing for war?”

On the way back after completing our requests, I would practice horseback spearsmanship whenever we’d found a group of monsters. On top of it being hard to balance, I got the feeling it would be easier to fight if I got off.

We found three goblins, and I urged everyone to let me fight alone.

May trampled the Goblin that stepped out in front of her with her forelegs.

“Oy!”

When her sudden movements destroyed my balance, May laughed.

“I mean, it aimed for my legs. And wait, how much time are you planning to spend on these small fries?”

Fighting on a horse was truly difficult.

From within the Jewel, I even heard some laughing voices from the ancestors. The Sixth.

『Try properly fixing the axis of your body. There’re loads of people on the battlefield where it’s hard to tell apart the movements of man and horse.』

I’ll be troubled, even if you tell me that.

At the very least, it’ll be bad if I can’t get the form together, I told myself as I practiced.

After we defeated the Goblins, Clara came down from the roof to collect up the magic stones.

Aria came beside her.

“Hey, let me have a go next.”

I dismounted from May, and confirmed it with her.

“May, is that fine with you?”

She didn’t sound too interested.

“I don’t really care.”

Aria took her spear back from me, and happily jumped onto May’s back. She had been a noble lady- albeit for a limited timeframe- and it seems she’d ridden horses before.

Her spear-toting figure atop a quilin was quite majestic.

“It’s been quite a while, but it sure is a nice feel.”

There, May.

“Ah, she feels more stable than Lyle.”

I averted my eyes from the two of them.

“… It really has been a long time since I last rode.”

And ended up giving an excuse. Perhaps finding that interesting, Aria sent May running with her right hand on her spear, and her left gripping the reins.

Having finished collecting the magic stones, Clara removed her gloves as she spoke.

“She’s skilled. She’s got it down nicely. I’d heard Aria was born into a warrior household, but… really, if she was a man, it wouldn’t be strange if she became a captain or general.”

I looked at Aria.

“You’re right. But in the present day, there are plenty of women who play quite large parts on the battlefield. I’m not sure about queens, but there’re the two maiden of the Great War, and the holy maiden. See, three of them right in the area.”

Clara gave a sigh, before turning to face me. And her eyes were more focused than usual.

“And that holy maiden is the problem here.”

I had transmitted the info I’d received to Clara. She’d read through the documents. So Clara knew about the current Holy Maiden as well.

Of course, the current one was terrible.

The Theocracy of Zayin was a country that pledged its faith to the last Goddess.

There wasn’t any problem in that, and in general most religion in itself consisted of devoting yourself to one of the Goddesses. The problem lay in this generation’s representative.

(Priests generally succeed their roles through blood, so they’re not much different from nobles. Yet the country’s top is decided by looks and talent?)

From among the consecrated virgins in service to their temples, irrelevant to bloodline, one that excelled in appearance and talent would be selected as the next holy maiden.

And because of that, there was a tendency for proficient ones to be selected.

At times, due to the circumstances of surrounding countries, a noble’s daughter would be sent into nun hood, and make her way all the way up to holy maiden. The high priests that held the roles of ministers seemed to be the ones actually carrying out the ruling, but the holy maiden had her share of authority.

And the High Priests were no monoliths in time.

(For a theocracy to go picking fights with everyone around it… that’s no good, isn’t it?)

Zayin’s history was also a history of war.

But perhaps because the predecessor had been of the moderate

faction, the squabbles had died down for the past twenty or so years. Up to then was simply awful, and perhaps the newer generation had a grudge with Lorphys, as she had tried to get into a large-scale war with them a number of times.

(Waging war just after taking power…)

Having heard of Zayin's situation, the ancestors' reactions coincided. The Fifth and Sixth sounded particularly irritated.

In order, Third and up.

『Their reason for war is terrible. I'm getting the urge to support Lorphys unconditionally.』
『Just what could they be thinking? Should we get them back, and put a trauma so deep in their skulls they'll never wage war again?』
『… Their rationale for war is non-existent. Zayin's side is out of the question. Definitely out of the question.』
『Crushing them will feel more refreshing.』
『We won't be able to put Lyle in power, so I must refuse. Just trying to manage that country will take up all of Lyle's time.』

… And it ended up I wouldn't be fighting on Zayin's side.

The Fifth said that even in the time he was alive, they irrationally attacked the feudal lords around him a number of times, and he was an individual who'd been forced to endure it.

He couldn't forgive them on an emotional level.

When I got the urge to breath out a sigh, a response came up on the【Search】Skill. A yellow point was being chased.

I immediately called out to everyone.

"Someone's being chased. Clara, return to Porter. Aria, stay up there, and follow us! Eva!"

I called out to Eva, and had her look in the direction the chased signal was in.

Among us, she had the greatest eyesight, so after staring a bit…

“A few carriages are being pursued. They’re large carriages, so it doesn’t seem they’ll be able to get away. But…”

With a perplexed face, she addressed me.

“It’s strange, I mean the ones chasing them don’t look like bandits. There’re definitely some circumstances behind that one.”

Hearing that from her, I began to consider it.

(So a chase with circumstance? Maybe it’s best we don’t get involved?)

The carriages turned right towards us.

“Lyle, what do we do?”

On Eva’s question, I decided to help them. When I touched the Jewel, the Third let out a bit of a fed-up voice. But he sounded a little happy.

『Playing hero, is it? Well, there are times when the ones being chased are the ones in the wrong. And wait, the ones doing the chases do seem to be directing some hostility towards us.』

The Sixth.

『Be careful. Those movements aren’t a simple bandit’s.』

I issued out orders.

“Clara, move Porter to put it between the pursued and pursuers. May, turn back to human form. Everyone hop onto Porter, and keep the pursuers company.”

We boarded Porter, and Clara began driving it. I moved myself to the moving Porter’s roof, gripped the Jewel in my left, hand, and brought out the Bow.

Eva also came up top, and stood stanced with her own bow.

The ones chasing the carriage was a group of males on horse-top wearing full-body robes.

When they saw that we were approaching, they immediately sent three our way.

“Ten pursuers… no, they have some more behind.”

Their movements were one thing, but their decision to send three our way was also a swift one. The Fifth gave me a warning.

『Lyle, don’t hold back. Your enemy is coming with the intent to kill. There’s the possibility the party being chased are completely in the wrong, so risking death for their sake is simply absurd.』

The Seventh.

『You’ll have to consider how to seal their lips as well. How troublesome. Good grief, in such a busy time.』

I took a deep breath, and made a pose to pull the bow.

After locking onto the enemies with the【Select】Skill, I didn’t hesitate to fire my arrows of light. The bolts came towards them, and the three riders immediately changed course, and took evasive action.

But the arrows followed along, and pierced through their robed figures.

One in the chest, another through the shoulder.

However, the third man in the center used his horse as a shield to escape the arrow. And after landing on the ground, he began sprinting our way.

I fired the next one, but this time, he tossed a knife to shoot it down.

“He saw through it?”

The Seventh raised his voice.

『I see. He at least has something going for him, in trying to challenge all of us alone.』

Eva shouted out.

“There!”

She fired an arrow. Perhaps she had some hesitation, and the projectile missed its mark. Our party had little experience fighting human opponents.

He quickly closed the distance, so I turned the Bow back to its Jewel form, and pulled my sabre.

(This one’s fast!)

Before I could remove the Jewel’s chain entwined around my arm, he jumped towards the roof of our speeding Porter.

The hand that emerged from his robe was clenched around a weapon.

I pulled my spare sabre to parry the slash from his dagger. And making a landing on Porter’s roof, he locked glares with me.

While we exchanged such pleasantries in that narrow space, Eva fired an arrow from behind me.

And in that instant, I stepped in to slash at him.

The man had prioritized stopping my attack over the arrow. With the bolt now stuck in his thigh, his movements grew worse. I used a sabre to ward off a blow from the dagger in his left hand again, before using my other one to cut forward.

(Too shallow.)

It’s not that I didn’t move in far enough.

My opponent sacrificed an arm to avoid a fatal blow.

As his left hand flew off somewhere, the Third let his voice from the Jewel.

『Lyle, kick him away at once!』

By the Second’s【All】, I could sense a peculiar swelling in his body’s Mana, and I could feel the impending danger.

I immediately put it to action. His eyes opened wide, and after the robed man fell from Porter's roof, he rolled along the ground a number of times, and exploded.

Eva behind me looked at the man who'd just erupted into flames.

"… He blew himself up."

Her expression indicated she couldn't believe it. When I looked in back towards the direction of the carriages, the pursuers immediately turned to retreated.

And another explosion sounded.

Turning around, I saw the place where we'd incapacitated the other two was also a torrent of flames.

The pursued carriages dropped speed, and began coming towards us.

And I noticed of the two I'd shot, it was the survivor who'd initiated the explosion.

"Just what is this?"

When I muttered that, the Fourth let out his voice.

『Once more, it looks like you've picked up quite a troublesome one.』

❼

We met up with the carriages, and observed the area before disembarking.

The horses the pursuers rode were riding off into the distance, and the pursuers themselves along with them. Even when I checked it up with Skills, their responses were moving farther and farther away.

Aria looked at the burning spots.

"No sane men would blow themselves up like that."

May stepped down in human form.

“Personally, I don’t think there’s a sane one to find among humanity.”

And the ones to step off of the carriage was but another group of robed figures. As they stood on guard, a single short old man removed his hood.

With desolate white hair adorning his head, he grew a lengthy beard. He was quite thin, and while his eyes naturally drooped, the rings under them were something horrible, making his face look villainous.

But…

“I give my deepest of gratitude for saving us. I am called【Gastone】. From the look of things, you seem to be adventurers.”

I nodded, and Gastone-san deeply lowered his head.

“After you’ve only just saved us, I know it may be inexcusable of me to ask, but could you possibly take up a request of ours? We’ll put out a reward, of course.”

From the Jewel came the Sixth’s voice.

『Definitely suspicious. Politely cut all ties with him here. Saving his life was already more than enough.』

Is what he said, but even if I was to refuse, I couldn’t help but be curious over the contents of such a request.

“We’ve only just completed a requests ourselves. There’s a limit to what we’ll be able to do.”

And Gastone spoke.

“It isn’t anything difficult. I’d like you to take up guard duties. There shouldn’t be a problem if we make it to Beim. If you’ve completed a request, would you already happen to be on the way there?”

It became quite hard to decline. There were some enervated voices from the Jewel.

But if it was only escorting them, or so I thought, as another robed figure came down from one of the carriages. From the build, probably a woman.

“Gastone, what shall we do about the ones who were attacked?”

There, Gastone-san began to panic.

“Wah! I’m sure I told you not to leave the carriage!”

Other woman were aboard it, and they all wore the same robes. When Gastone hurriedly tried to return them all inside, the first woman took off her hood.

“I give my thanks for coming to our aid. When we were first assailed, there was a carriage that fell behind. If possible, I’d like you to go to their aide. I’ll pay in full for your services.”

Gastone-san held his right hand to his face.

And I looked at the woman. I had seen a sketch reminiscent of her among the documents.

“… Could you be…”

Clara came up to me, and seeing the woman’s face, she was also quite flustered.

“Lyle-san, this is bad. Really bad!”

Aria.

“Eh? Something up with this lady?”

May.

“Ah~ right, that sketch. This person does look like it.”

While she seemed a little irritated at Aria’s statement, the woman let it slide. Blond hair, and eyes a light blue.

I had heard her age was in the mid-thirties, but I felt she could pass for her late twenties.

“I have served as the previous generation’s Holy Maiden of Zayin, my name is【Thelma Zayin】. And I want to officially make a request. Would you take up our escort?”

The woman who named herself as the previous Holy Maiden looked

right at me.

I felt a cold sweat break out, but some cheers were risen in the Jewel.

The Third seemed to be hitting against the table.

『Lyle, you did it! Let's take up the former Holy Maiden's request here!』

『With this, Lyle can get involved in this story! What's more with a former-leader diplomacy card! How shall we use it, men!』

『Don't let her get away. Definitely don't let her get away! Secure her at once!』

『The fact she was running means there was a need to flee Zayin, or perhaps those were pursuers from Lorphys… this is getting fun!』

『Good things happen to good people. He did his good deeds by the day, and the Goddesses have blessed him with fortune for it. They can be useful now and again, I see. Very well, listen to her situation, and think up how you're going to use it.』

I thought.

(Even when a troublesome ones come along, these guys rejoice…)

5 - Holy Maiden Candidate

Thelma Zayin.

The woman who once held the title of Holy Maiden drew closer to the burned down carriage as we kept lookout of the surroundings.

There were traces of battle around, and in the burned carriage, were the bodies of men holding weapons, whom I assumed to be guards.

Whether their deaths had led to victory or not was cleanly burned away.

Eva held her hand to her mouth, while Aria's face was pale.

I didn't feel too great either.

(… Come to think of it, that was the first I'd directly dispatched a human on my own.)

I had rendered the return trip of some adventurers in Arumsaas impossible, but it's not like I had directly dealt with them.

I felt a strange sense of unease. Clara walked over to my side.

"Lyle-san, only one of them survived. They've lost consciousness, but they're more or less safe."

I nodded, and headed in that direction.

Zayin's former High Priest【Gastone Benini】intended to perform their last rites, and bury the dead.

But due to a lack of time, he was digging out the holes with magic.

"… Couldn't you give them a more respectful burial?"

Is what Thelma-san said, but Gastone-san shook his head. He understood how dangerous it was to remain here.

Clara tugged at my sleeve.

“Lyle-san, I didn’t want to say it, but if you’ll let me have my say; why did you accept this request, even listening to her willfulness on top of that? We should have been on our way as soon as time permitted.”

Clara’s words were correct. They were correct, but I had circumstances of my own.

Mainly the ancestors in the Jewel.

The Third spoke.

『Put her in your debt here, and have her rely on you in Beim. Luckily enough, Novem-chan and the others are out searching for our own stronghold in Beim. They plan to buy a relatively big one, so you could even give them shelter!』

Novem, Miranda, Monica and Shannon… the reason the four of them were left behind, on top of information gathering, was to attain a base in Beim.

Normally, I’d have taken Monica along, but there was cleaning to be done in the property they’d purchase, so she wanted to stay behind.

But as she saw the rest of us off, she looked extremely lonely.

The Sixth.

『You’ve got to give a good impression. While you’re at it, to get yourself more involved in this mess, do you think you could try drawing out some information, Lyle?』

The ancestors were even more lively than usual.

I felt like letting out a sigh, but I endured it and turned my eyes to the survivor. He had yet to regain consciousness, and we had handed over some of the medicine we had on hand to treat him. The Fifth spoke.

『… How suspicious. Even after they’d erased all other evidence so cleanly, having a survivor left behind feels quite out of place. Is it a trap?』

I turned my eyes to the surviving man, but there wasn’t anything

strange about him. Even confirming with Skills, I couldn't really understand anything.

(I should've taken Shannon. Rather than leaving her to lend a hand in cleaning, she may have been more useful on this side.)

It was too late, but I regretted not putting more thought into our formation. I addressed Clara.

"Well, it isn't a bad thing to get her in our favor. And let's remain wary of this survivor of ours. Theres something bothering me."

Hearing that, Clara nodded, and went off to transmit my words to the rest of our comrades.

I looked at the former Holy Maiden Thelma-san.

A hooded girl was standing beside her. From how those around were treating her, she was being cared for just as much as Thelma-san, so she must be an important one.

When I remained vigilant of our surroundings, I sensed the pursuers close in the distance a bit.

(They haven't given up. I can only think they're getting their numbers together to launch an ambush.)

Our opponents were familiar with battle, and they were resolved enough to blow themselves up.

On top of equipment gathered in accordance with their ordeal, I could tell they weren't bandits.

There was a possibility there would be poisons in their weapons, and I got the feeling concealed weapons were fair game.

(How troublesome. The Giant Sword will be a bit rough. And the Bow was blocked.)

I didn't think they'd start their counterattack so soon, but they were accustomed to battle. Turning the Jewel to the Giant Sword to fight would be too dangerous.

The information about the Bow was already transmitted to them, and

perhaps they had put up some countermeasure with it.

While I tried thinking up a new plan, Gastone-san came over to us.

“I apologize for taking our time. Let us depart at once.”

I nodded, and issued orders. I had me comrades board Porter, and had us take up the rear.

I also thought it best if we looked after the injured.

“We’ll take care of the injured.”

When I said that, Thelma-san wandered over, and shook her head.

“We cannot trouble you to such an extent. And I want your party to concentrate on guard duties. The injured man is one who has been in service to us for many years. Please let us use our own hands to treat him.”

From the Jewel, the Seventh let his voice.

『… So pushing her to leave him with you won’t work. If you tell her there may be something wrong, her sentiment for her friend will dull her decision. Lyle, he won’t wake up for a while, but you have to stay on your guard.』

The Fourth was of the same opinion.

『I want to remove uncertain factors as much as possible, but you’ll lose credibility if you force them apart.』

And tying him up since something may happen was also impossible.

He was a cause of concern, but we abided Thelma-san’s opinion. But the Third gave a proposal of his own.

『Lyle, tell them to lighten the load on a carriage so the important ones can get away, and load the man onto that one. At the very least, keep damage to a minimum.』

Just calling him suspicious wouldn’t get anywhere. I gripped the Jewel, and proposed the Third’s proposal to Thelma-san and Gastone-san.

❼

The way back to Beim.

Stationed at the back of the group, we looked at the three carriages pressing on in front of us.

They had stripped off quite a few of the parts, but their constructions were sturdy. With a former Holy Maiden and High Priest riding them, it doesn't seem they were something prepared spur of the moment.

Climbing onto the roof, May looked behind, and started up a conversation with me.

"Hey, I'm a bit curious, but…"

"What is it?"

I turned to her, and she plopped herself down cross-legged, but she continued speaking without sending her eyes my way.

"What will we do if those guys from before come back? Run? Fight?"

I answered the question.

"Run if we can. I'd like to think they won't follow us all the way to Beim. But if we're going to fight, we're going to crush them."

There was the possibility they'd infiltrate Beim, and lay in wait. Luckily, the attackers were stuck on us, and there weren't any traces of them having sent a message to their boys back home.

Twelve in number.

We didn't have that many fighters, but we had May along. She was the most reliable among our current numbers.

Aria and Eva were dependable as well, but the problem lay in that they had hesitation.

And I can't say I didn't have any either.

(Hah, so when it comes down to it, it'll dull my blade. But if I hesitate, I may die. And I can't go around dying here.)

When I confirmed my resolve once more, May turned her face to me.

"Then aim for victory in the road ahead. The path becomes narrow, and our opponents seem to be in a hurry, so wouldn't they aim for such a point? You're using a Skill to raise this group's movement speed, so the other side will be a bit impatient."

The【Speed】Skill hastened our movement. If I pushed it, then outrunning them may be possible as well.

"Do you have some sort of plan?"

When I asked, May smiled.

"It isn't a plan. I'm just a quilin. I've taken on humans seeking to seize me. And a number of them were quite troublesome folk. No matter how far you run and run, they'll give chase, so there wasn't a choice but to defeat them. But if you hold out slaying them, the survivors build up their knowledge, and build up their traps and numbers, so I always aim to take out the whole herd at once."

(Purposely fall for the trap, and lure them out?)

I nodded and listened, when the Fifth's voice came from the Jewel. I ignored it.

『You've been through a lot, May… the tears are…』

May gave a grin.

"Even we will kill humans if they corner us so. But at such time, you've got to get all the troublesome ones together, and take them out at once. Fall for the trap, and aim for the moment they all try to jump you."

As I thought, she was thinking to purposely take the bait.

"That's a dangerous one. If we're surrounded like that, there'll be casualties. You aren't here alone."

There, May looked right at me, and scoffed.

“You’re joking. Lyle, it’s best you trust in your own power just a little bit more.”

Saying that, she turned her field of vision to the back, and didn’t say another word.

❼

… Inside the carriage.

Thelma called out to the young girl sitting beside her.

“Aura, you’ve been acting strange for a while now.”

The girl beside her was【Aura】. Her hair was long and wavy, while her body’s build was quite delicate.

She had gone against the current generation’s Holy Maiden【Remis Zayin】in the Saint Selection process, so Thelma had taken it to herself to take her out of the country.

“It isn’t anything, in particular. But how nice it is. For us to be able to meet adventurers on the way. They’re huge softies, and easy to make use of.”

Thelma narrowed her eyes, and cautioned Aura.

“After they saved us, what’s with your attitude? If you didn’t have that side to you, you’d have been the perfect candidate.”

Her education was the same, but Aura’s appearance was of high class. Thelma and Gastone had backed her, and recommended her as the next Holy Maiden.

Of course, it’s not like her appearance and education were the only reason for which she was selected.

Just as with Thelma, Aura was a member of the moderate faction. A little over twenty years ago, while being a Theocracy, Zayin was going through a stream of continuous war.

It waged war on its surroundings, and continued to pillage and plunder.

But it's not like those surrounding nations would just sit quiet, and suffer. They invaded Zayin's land in a similar fashion, and brought pain to their populace.

Aura lifted her legs up onto the seat in front of her, in quite a sloppy fashion. She didn't look like what one would call a candidate for leadership.

"They're only chasing us because we ran. We should've just stayed quiet back at the temple in Zayin. Those divine knight blockheads just hate it when a virgin gets involved in politics."

Those divine knights she wrote off as blockheads were Zayin's official knight brigade. Under the name of the Goddess, the knights that abided the Holy Maiden. But their role wasn't really any different from the knights of any other country out there.

No, in violence, perhaps the divine knights were a bit superior.

The pillager's mindset built over long years of war had persisted through Thelma's time, and she had found herself unable to alter it.

And because of that, the anti-Thelma radical party was able to gather and organize itself. The candidate pushed forth by that radical faction was【Remis】.

Thelma let out a sigh, and apologized to Aura.

"I do feel sorry for getting you dragged into the mess. But if we had run alone, then it would have invited harm unto you without fail."

Aura looked up at the ceiling.

"That's why I never wanted to be a Holy Maiden candidate. There were plenty more options, weren't there? They should've just had a pretty girl a bit lacking in the head department sit on an empty throne, yet they just had to get her dragged into politics, did they?"

Thelma held her head to her brow. Likely from a headache.

“And so war came year after year, and I couldn’t do anything of the hatred that had been passed down through the ages. In my time, our neighbors made an alliance, and came from all sides to wipe Zayin off the map, you know.”

Aura laughed.

“And wouldn’t that have been better for all of us?”
“Of course not!”

A silence fell between the two of them.

After a while, Aura opened her mouth.

“… Once we get to Beim, I’m going to go on to live a quiet life.”

Thelma shook her head to the side.

“That has a nice sound to it. But there should be an, ‘if’ somewhere in there. The adventurers we’ve hired seem proficient, but I really don’t know what’s to come.”

She had a hunch towards the identity of the squadron chasing them.

The subdivision of the divine knights kept for assassination, sent by the radicals.

Under absolute secrecy, they’d committed a number of ill deeds, and they were a squadron that existed for covert operations. They were the elites of the divine knights, and quite a troublesome existence.

But they hadn’t dispatched that great a number.

If they were able to make it to Beim, the assassins would probably return to the country, thought Thelma.

Aura rearranged the folding of her legs as she looked at Thelma.

“Wouldn’t this have been solved if you tried to get along with those blockheads? If it’s you, Thelma-sama, then you could’ve done it, right? In truth, couldn’t you have retired over ten years ago, built up a temple or something in the sticks, and lived a quieter life?”

After her face became expressionless, Thelma began grumbling out

complaints.

“Even I wanted to retire and build up a family… but Gastone wouldn’t stop crying. And we weren’t able to find the next candidate. On top of that, the divine knights went on strike, and we couldn’t use them at all. Yet whenever we relied on adventurers for their neglected jobs, they’d complain… just what did they want me to do, dammit? I wanted to retire to the countryside and get married or something.”

Having flipped a strange switch, perhaps Aura knew she had done wrong, as she tried to follow through. She was in debt to Thelma.

She was able to serve by the Holy Maiden as a consecrated virgin, and was treated quite favorable.

“How about you find a quiet life in Beim too? See, marriage is still…”

After hearing that much, Thelma smiled.

“Aura, I turn thirty six this year, yet you imply there’s still a partner for me? Even when it would’ve been hard ten years earlier?”

Seeing her enlightened smile, Aura’s heart began to fill with pitiful sentiment…

6 - High Priest

Night.

Carrying out guard duty, we kept watch of our surroundings as we stopped to rest. Our movement speed was high, so we made more distance with our pursuers than I had anticipated.

But there was something I wanted to confirm, so I went and asked the former High Priest Gastone-san.

A little parted from the campfire, we conversed with warm drinks in our hands.

There was plenty I wanted to ask, but getting to know the backstory of our pursuers was the first priority. And what Gastone-san's group had as their objective was important as well.

Gastone-san made a tired expression, as he explained the situation.

"Elites of the divine knight brigade?"

He nodded, before muttering in an annoyed fashion.

"Elite in name alone, they are an assassination corps. They've always been a unit that carried out some questionable work. The former Holy Maiden Thelma-sama was of the moderate faction, so she couldn't help but build up resentment with the knights…"

From the Jewel, I heard a voice chastising Gastone-san. It was the Fifth.

『Then instead of just opposing them, why not moderately send them out to subjugate monsters and bandits, and make a show of praising them for their efforts? Opposing them to create sparks within the country, and is it already a raging fire? Just abandoning a huge problem like that is unreasonable.』

Even when he abandoned quite a few sparks with his own children, I thought to myself, but restrained from putting it to mouth. I tried

softening the Fifth's words, and transmitting them.

"Monster slaying, and bandit subjugation, wouldn't it have been fine if you recommended they performed in that field?"

There, Gastone-san made a horridly worn-out smile.

"You think Thelma-sama hadn't noticed? Even if I don't look it, I'm of High Priest lineage, you know. Naturally enough, we didn't want to maintain a knight brigade, yet hand no work to them at all."

High priest lineage. In noble terms, perhaps count or viscount, or some position around that. There are sure to be un-noble-ish parts to their duties, but their priesthood was decided by heredity.

It's likely just how things worked in Zayin. I don't hear about things like that much elsewhere.

"… Not invading foreign soil. The high priests and knights conspired against pouring their efforts into internal affairs, and we ended up having to rely on adventurers. We put some needless funding into it, and somehow got the shape of it together, but that took twenty long years to accomplish. Without being able to hand her position over the entire time, Thelma-sama went through much troubles."

The Fifth apologized to him.

『… I'll be frank. I'm sorry.』

The man couldn't hear it, but I also had some feelings I couldn't put away.

"Thelma-sama, was it? Then couldn't she have just stayed in power, without handing the role to the next generation?"

There, Gastone-san put his hand to his forehead with a troubled expression. Quetly, he spilled his feelings.

"… Age-wise, the Holy Maiden is a strict position. They must always be pretty. She may still be beautiful, but shall I say she isn't a match for the younger girls? The populace was also demanding a new one."

The Sixth, fed-up.

『I'm surprised rule has been successfully handed down all the way up to now. Besides, if they're meant to be pretty decorations, then wouldn't just anybody do? One wrong move, and how easy would it be to instate a puppet…』

There, the Third.

『Ah, so that's how it is. Like this, some country's woman becomes Holy Maiden, and they use Zayin to indirectly destroy the countries opposed to them. And I thought it was stupid how they were always picking fights with those around them. No, I still think it quite stupid, mind you.』

While thinking it was messed up, in various ways, I questioned Gastone-san further.

"About the current generation Holy Maiden, umm…"

"She used to be the daughter of a noble family from the neighboring country of【Selva】. Even when we're usually supposed to avoid girls from such origins."

Selva… A small country, and one with a few things moving about behind the scenes. In this land jumbled up by a complex array of small nations, they were maintaining a status quo.

Unlike a certain two countries, there weren't any signs of them going through intense battle.

(Would it be possible to get these lands together? No, in the first place, is it physically possible?)

When I became anxious, the Seventh spoke with delight.

『How nice. The previous Holy Maiden, and a High Priest of the moderate faction… you've got the top and her aid in your grasp.』

The Fourth.

『This is getting close to rebellion. No, this is rebellion. The former Holy Maiden who stole back her seat, and the High Priest driven

out!』

The Third continued on.

『Saddened with the state of her country, the former Holy Maiden couldn't let herself sit still! Though it would be better if she was a tad younger!』

The Fifth.

『Well then, how about putting the two of them on the surface to build up influence, and putting Lyle at the center. If you get Zayin in your hands, you can use rebellion as an excuse to completely overhaul the ruling methodology of the country.』

The Sixth.

『Right. The Divine Knight Brigade? Let's crush the elites they've dispatched here, and now. Thinking of the scale of the country, there shouldn't be that many of them. I'm sure it'll be a grave blow.』

… From what I've heard, she officially handed off the position of Holy Maiden. It was a bit forceful, but Gastone-san couldn't help but acknowledge it as well. Yet the ancestors were telling me to go forth under the banner of rebellion.

When I tapped and rolled the Jewel with my fingertip, the Third tried to convince me.

『Don't like it, Lyle? Then think about it like this! For Zayin, a country whose ruling order is full of problems, you'll use this opportunity to reform them! What, the surrounding countries are already using it to run riot, after all. More than anything, you're doing good! To lead this land of endless strife along the right path, why now swallow down your tears here!』

The Fifth as well.

『And wait, even if you leave it alone, it'll eventually be crushed by Celes. While that thing still has her eyes on her own country, overbearing as it may be, you should more or less get this land together. Even that may not be enough, but you should think of the

surrounding situations as well. And they're an opponent I can't forgive overlooking.』

The Fifth seemed brimming with motivation. Within that, the Sixth called out to me.

『Lyle, I get how you feel, but it's true that there's a need to break the deadlocks on this situation. You're just a piece of that. And if you abandon it, Celes is sure to move in the foreseeable future. Look a little ahead, and make your decision.』

His was a kind voice.

After a while, I asked Gastone-san of his plans from here on.

"Once you reach Beim, what do you plan to do?"

"We can't be working up too much a fuss. I only wish to secure safety for those that were dragged into all this. Both Thelma-sama, and the former Holy Maiden candidate Aura-sama are with us. At the very least, perhaps I can end it by having them set their mark on me alone."

While his appearance looked villainous, he was quite a nice person. Perhaps he'd gone through a fair share of trouble. Even so, the Ancestors were…

『What? Former Holy Maiden candidate? That means the rival of the current one, right? … Oh, you've got even more cards to play!』

『She was good enough for candidacy. There are others giving orders within Zayin, right… this is going to be fun!』

『Then once we've got our 'just cause,' should we go sell our names in Lorphys? That one also has nothing but a princess as well, right? The king and queen died in accident?』

『It's nothing but shady talk. And there's an overly large amount of countries maintaining tranquility. Even when their names pop up, for a country not to show a single movement…』

『No, no, this time really was worthwhile. You get to chip down the war potential of the power you'll end up fighting, and you've even got

your hands on a ‘just cause’. Now you should get everything together, and make the preparations for victory』

They sounded like they were enjoying it. Enjoying the hell out of it.

(These guys are scary.)

I took a deep breath, and offered a proposal to Gastone-san.

“Gastone-san.”

“Something the matter?”

“It’s about the pursuers. There’s no doubt they’re still chasing us. I anticipate they were launch an attack on us shortly.”

“… I understand that. Rotten as they may be, they’re the elites of a knight brigade. If you think it impossible, I do not mind your party flee. But at that time, if you would only take Thelma-sama, and Aura-sama along. The others, if possible, please take them along. As long as they can get my head, they should be satisfied enough to…”

Before he could finish, I smiled.

“You don’t mind if we take them out first, do you?”

“… Hah? Eh!?”

Watching his surprised face, I began explaining the plan.

❼

It was a valley along the shortest possible route to Beim.

That space surrounded by rockface was a terrain difficult to traverse through. But having decided we would proceed down the shortest route, we couldn’t help but pass through it.

If I may add on, this was a space quite suited to an ambush. With so much gravel, it was hard for carriages to press on. Even within that, Porter was moving without a problem.

(Porter… you really are a reliable one.)

His marvelous glass-ball eyes looked as if they were sparkling radiantly today as well. Our reliable comrade.

“Now then, it’s about time.”

Looking around, I confirmed the situation with Skills. I verified the surrounding terrain with the Fifth’s【Dimension】, and used the Sixth’s【Spec】to get a grasp of the enemy’s states. They had pushed themselves to overtake us, and had circled around.

There was some worth to be found in purposefully planning following a route that could go no other way than this valley, and luring them out.

Clara approached me.

“Lyle-san, the preparations are complete.”

Aria was keeping lookout, and Eva the elf seemed to have noticed from the surroundings air, that enemies were around.

Rather than us, they were going for their designated target: the carriage. I sensed the tense presences around, as I issued orders to May at her position.

(May, you can hear me, right? Can you see my map?)

On the map floating up in my head, a number of red dots were shining. A little separated, was a group keeping watch over us as well. And if the main force failed, they likely planned to return, and give a report.

But we couldn’t let them get away.

(I can hear you. And wait, it’s pounding in my head. So which one am I supposed to be attacking?)

I had her undertake the attack on the party watching us from further away. With that distance between us, another risked letting them get away.

(I’ll leave the further ones to you. We’ll take down the ones launching the attack.)

(… Sure. I'll be back soon enough, but will I make it in time?)

I achieved communication with May through the Skill【Connection】, and told her to beat down ones keeping watch.

To a quilin such as herself, a small force of knights was easy enough. The greater problem was the main force that was going to be attacking us.

To Clara walking beside me, I called out.

"Message relayed to May. I left the ones keeping watch to her. She plans on meeting up with us once she's done with that."

Clara's eyes turned to Porter. She was sweating, and rather than anxious, it looked as if she was working hard.

When the surrounding enemies took up their positions, Aria was nervous. She sensed the atmosphere, and put power into her body.

Eva had also noticed the enemy, but she was pretending she hadn't. Just where would the aim, and where were they deployed. I could understand them like the palm of my hand. I gripped the Jewel in my left hand, and raised up my right to cast magic.

"Ice Wall!"

Around the line of carriages- and around Porter- floating walls of ice came into being; as if specifically aiming for those points, fire began to come down. They shot arrows as well, but the walls of ice blocked them. The horses drawing the carriages were excited, and calmed down by the coachmen pulling on their reigns.

After I warded off attack after attack, a robed group jumped down from the cliffs. Seven in number. Two held back in wait atop the crags.

As the armed men ran our way, I changed the Jewel in my hands to the Bow, and used a Skill.

With【Select】setting my aim, I fired off a few arrows at the sky. After the first one flew up high, it soon went out view.

I turned it back to Jewel form, hung it around my neck, and drew two sabres.

Our opponents seemed suspicious of my actions, but they sent four running after the carriages. The remaining ones came at us. I stood in front of Clara, weak in close combat, to protect her, while Aria and Eva met them head on.

“So even as we try to hold them back, you’ll go for their mark… how loyal.”

I looked at them, and opened my mouth, but it didn’t seem they intended to answer. I gave a wide grin.

“By the way, you really should pay attention to the sky.”

While he seemed a bit intrigued by my words, the robed man before me displayed no hesitation in thrusting out his spear. While the gravel made it easy to loose one’s footing, he accurately aimed for my vitals.

(Sharp movements… but softer than the Sixth’s!)

I used the sabre in my left hand to repel its point, turned my body, and used my right sabre to cut down the arrow shot from atop the cliff. Using that motion, I managed to plunge my sabre into the robed man’s body, and kick him away.

I left the sabre in him, getting hit a bit by the blood spurt, and used my free left hand to prepare magic. When I turned, I saw the enemy trying to cut at Eva in front.

“Stone Bullet!”

I pointed my left hand at the enemy, sending a number of rocks from the ground flying into him. He swung off his robe to circumvent some damage.

And avoiding it, his gaze fell on me. Those eyes of his were filled with hatred.

“Don’t focus so much on me… I’m sure I said it already.”

The robed figures apart from the ones that came at us broke down the carriage doors, and marched in. What they were searching for was likely the former Holy Maiden and candidate, as well as the High Priest.

When the coachmen ran from the carriages, the sky began to shine. Our opponents' attention turned there, as small arrows of light began raining down one after the next.

We stopped on the spot. They tried to flee from those small bolts, but in this enclosed valley without a place to run, they were pierced through carriages and all. Each one of them was low in output, but with so many of them piercing through, the enemies collapsed without resistance.

When I looked around, I saw Aria stained in blood, clenching her spear, as her legs gave way below her. I ran over, and looked at her foe.

(So she managed to user her Skills to defeat him.)

She was trembling, and her breathing was strange. She must have received a mental shock unlike what she felt when slaying monsters. I put a hand on her shoulder.

"Good work. Get some rest."

Aria nodded, hung her head, and vomited. I patted her back, and looked around. Eva was sitting down. She didn't seem to be injured.

Confirming with my Skills, there weren't any surviving enemies.

And jumping down from the cliffs, May landed on the ground.

"As I thought, it's already over. Just as I said."

Seeing her stick out her chest in pride, I gave a light, 'you're right,' in response, as I patted Aria's back, and looked at Porter. The back door opened, and the former Holy Maiden and co. came out in succession.

They had been forcefully stuffed into the narrow loading tray.

Seeing the aftermath of the battle, Thelma-san spoke in surprise.

“Could it be you really defeated them? There should have been close to ten.”

Eyes of disbelief were sent our war, and after Gastone-san disembarked, he also looked between us, and the defeated elites.

From the Jewel, the Third.

『Now then, with this, Lyle has left a strong impression. While we’re at it, was it fifteen elites? You were able to beat them, but… Lyle, this is only the start.』

On his serious voice, I gripped the Jewel. But beside me, Aria was still spitting up. I patter her back, and continued calling out to her.

7 - Runaway Son

After turning the tables on the divine knights from Zayin, we dug graves for them.

Thinking just leaving them as is was too harsh, Thelma-san proposed it. Because they were doing their jobs as knights of Zayin, and were men of her country.

Hearing that, the Sixth spoke.

『Reasons aside, leaving them will leave evidence behind. Why not cremate and or bury them? Ah, make sure you collect their equipment.』

Arms, luggage, and horses. After collecting up their belongings, we gave them proper burials. So as not to give any divine knight comrades out to investigate any information on us. At the same time, it would to gain a favorable impression with Thelma-san.

I mean, we had to earn their trust in the timespan before we reached Beim. While it wouldn't be enough to oppose Celes, the current me didn't have the leisure to be picky about my means.

I needed Zayin's power.

After we buried them, former Holy Maiden Thelma-san offered up a prayer, and gave us her thanks.

"On top of risking your lives to fight them, I thank you for going along with my pleas to such an extent. I do think you have your dissatisfactions with it, so I shall be putting an extra on your reward."

It appears she was taking my sentiment into consideration. But I shook my head.

"You sure are kind. But the initial proposed sum will do just fine. That was the contract we signed. Just think of this matter as a freebee."

"You have my gratitude. I heard that many adventurers were of a

rougher sort, but it looks like there are splendid ones around as well.”

Next to Thelma-san, Gastone-san looked on with worry, and lowered his head to me.

I answered him with a smile, and looked up at the sky.

With the attack, and the cleanup, it had begun to grow dark.

“We’ll have to camp here tonight. If we rush, about two days to Beim? Let’s prepare for tomorrow, and get some rest for now.”

Internally, I thought.

(I have to gain her trust in two days, divulge the plot to retake Zayin, and have her become my, ‘just cause’… That’s quite a high hurdle.)

While I grumbled about it, it was the ancestors’ proposal. In order to gain more power, there wasn’t a better idea around, so I went right into putting it to practice.

But I also thought I wasn’t suited to the task.

(Hah, is it going well?)

Seeing Thelma-san and Gastone-san give their earnest thanks, my heart began to hurt.

❼

Within the Jewel.

The Sixth’s room of memory.

While everyone was falling asleep, I consulted with the Sixth Generation Head. While holding a halberd, and fighting him, that is.

When I did a horizontal slash, he judged it, and dodged by a small margin before repeating a series of thrusts on me.

『Hmm, so what was the problem again? You feel like you’re deceiving them, and it’s a load on your mind?』

I avoided the thrust, regained my stance, and got my breathing together.

“Y-yes. Rather than deceiving, I’m using them, and how should I put it…”

He put his halberd over his shoulder, looked at my face, and touched his left hand to his chin.

『Feeling guilty? Well, I guess there’s really no helping it on an emotional level.』

I undid my stance, and let the halberd clasped in my right hand fade away. The Sixth pierced his own into the ground, and sat on the spot.

I sat as well.

『Lyle, your field of vision is narrow. Try getting a greater outlook.』

“Field of vision, is it? It’s best I don’t joke around saying I can perceive every part of my surroundings with the Second’s Skills, isn’t it.”

The Sixth showed his teeth, and grinned, before talking to me.

『Right. Not that sort of vision. Just how will your actions resound into the future. And what each result of your moves may bring… consider what might happen if you do nothing at all, as well.』

The Sixth put it simply. Celes wasn’t the only reason. He told me his take on why Zayin couldn’t be left as it was.

『There’s a blatant issue with its governing system, and the surrounding countries are making good use of it. I’m sure Zayin makes use of it in its own way, system, but at this rate, all that awaits it is ruin. It’s been three hundred years since the unified continent under the Sentras Kingdom collapsed… Now they’ve all gotten themselves together, and it’s about time they put an end to all the constant warfare.』

That wasn’t wrong, but I questioned as to whether I should be the one to do it.

I didn’t like how it felt like I was using Celes as an excuse to take advantage of them.

(I’m not wrong, am I? Is it really alright to get Zayin and Lorphys involved in this mess for my sake?)

There, perhaps the Sixth sensed some hesitation in me, as he stood and changed the surrounding scenery. We were within a representation of his memories.

So it was a place where he could change the scenery at will.

『Don’t worry so much. Then how about I show you a good example?』

And there, I found the urban lands of the Weihs Territory governed by the Walt House.

It was smaller than it was when I was driven from my home, but I could see the same traces.

I followed him in standing, to see a young man get punched out the door of a small bar.

The one hit through the air had his long red hair swept back. The figure of the Sixth in his younger days.

The look in his eyes was even sharper than it was now, and he gave off quite a thorny impression.

“Um, this is?”

『… A memory from when I ran away from home.』

And the young Sixth Generation Head… Fiennes stood, and shouted out as if he were a roaring beast.

『Don’t f*ck with me! Lower my head to that asshole? Not on the death of me!』

Walking out the bar was a large man, with a bald head, and magnificent goatee. His shirt was pushed out by his sheer muscle, and he looked formidable at but a glance.

Perhaps he had really fought his way through war, as there were numerous scars on his arms and face.

『… Kid, I don't give a damn how much a tab you rack up drowning your worries at my place. Run wild all you want. Punch me, and see if I care. But that man… I ain't gonna take any insults at Fredricks-sama.』

Lifted up by the collar, Fiennes glared, and spat out his saliva.

And I watched it.

"… Is that the bar's owner?"

The Sixth nodded embarrassingly, and scratched his head as he explained.

『That's right. He let me drink on a running tab. I heard about it later, but apparently the Fifth's men would come by now and again to pay it off. Only learned that one when I'd earned enough to pay it myself.』

Speaking nostalgically, he looked upon the fight of Fiennes and the large man. Fiennes sent a punch, and perhaps he had his share of training as well, as the barkeeper was sent flying off his feet.

The town's residents gathered around, and looked at Fiennes…

『Even when he's that man's son…』
『It's that pattern where the parent's proficient, and the child's no good.』
『Will the Walt House be alright?』

Just looking at the reactions around, it seems the Fifth had quite a favorable impression. He was famous for being a womanizer, but it seems he was loved by his people.

When Fiennes mounted the man, and began punching him left and right, the scene turned gray, and its time came to a stop.

The Sixth spoke to me.

『To me and my brothers and sisters, he was the worst father there

was. His attitude without any emotions or interest pissed me off. But the people loved him. Why do you think?』

I gave a simple answer.

“Because territory management doesn’t have anything to do with the lord’s family problems? No, but it does bring about problems with succession, so…”

There, the Sixth showed another scene.

In it, stood Fiennes, all beat up from a brawl. An old couple was calling out to him. The sky was dark, and perhaps it was winter, as Fiennes looked quite cold.

『… You’ll get sick if you stand out here. Our house doesn’t have much, but won’t you step inside?』

Perhaps Fiennes realized that he was going to freeze to death at that rate. He accepted the couple’s good will, and entered the house.

They gave him a warm welcome. They prepared a bath, and a splendid meal. To that old couple, they must have been doing their best for him.

So Fiennes ate, and slept in a warm bed.

And the Sixth watched the scene with nostalgia, and embarrassment.

『It was always nothing but failures. Lyle, you see, I… was an incorrigible fool. I snapped and left the house, ran rampant, and had to be saved by someone else. It was always a repetition of something like that.』

When I heard that, my words wouldn’t come out.

I thought he was a little delinquent-esque, but he really was a full-blown delinquent. As I felt myself surprised he was able to return to the House safely like that, the Fiennes began to speak.

Fiennes was in the middle of breakfast.

『… Why did you save someone like me?』

That impudent attitude of his wasn't something that should've been directed at the ones who saved his life. Even so, the wife seemed delighted.

『With this, we will finally be able to pay off our debt to Fredricks-sama.』

『We've troubled that man far too much.』

Fiennes spoke unpleasantly.

『That damn old man?』

『Yes. Our village burnt down, and he made it possible for we, the survivors, to live on here.』

『He rushed over to save the village. Yet we could only speak ill of him… I've always regretted it.』

Fiennes looked a little surprised, but his attitude instantly turned sour.

『That's because that's his job, dammit! It's all that damn old man's fault for not making it in time! You lot are being fooled!』

But even after hearing that, the old couple smiled.

『You've got me there. But that man was kind. So kind it was even pitiful to watch.』

The memory footage cut off, and we were in the yard once more.

"The scene's changed again."

There, the Sixth let out a sigh.

『As if I could show you any more embarrassing sides of me! Next is a memory from after I returned. Well, I guess this one's also an embarrassing one, but…』

In front of the mansion stood some troubled soldiers. A ragged Fiennes before them, they seemed to be hesitating on whether to let

him in or not.

The path to the entranceway opened up, and from it the Fifth… Fredricks walked out. I could see Fiennes' mother beside him.

Fiennes' mother ran over to her son, and with all her might, delivered a slap unto his face.

『Bwah!』

His upper body swayed with the force, and next she used the back of her hand to hit him the other direction. Seeing that, I thought.

(Huh? She looks kind, but she's ridiculously strong, this person!)

『Stupid son of mine! Running out the door, and coming back in such a pitiful state! Just how much do you plan on making me worry!?』

Seeing the woman continue a series of slaps, I drew back a bit. I mean, Fiennes was becoming even more ragged than he was before.

Fredricks also looked as if he was retreating a little.

With his face battered so much, Fiennes' cheeks swelled, and he looked quite pitiable.

『… My mother's palm you see… it resounded in my heart, but it also resounded in my skull and bones. In various ways… it really hurt.』

Fiennes' large body froze up under his mother's scowl.

Seeing that, Fredricks sighed, and spoke.

『Hah, go get in the bath, and change out of those clothes. Once you've eaten and slept, come over to my place. If you make up all you've gotten behind in while you were away, I will accept you as my successor.』

Saying that, he turned, and returned to the mansion. The gatekeeper soldiers lent their shoulders to the unsteady young Fiennes, and carried him along behind.

And shedding tears, Fiennes' mother followed along her son.

“… You were forgiven?”

『Yep, forgiven. Well, I complained about this and that to my brothers, and shared some sarcasm. The worst was when Milleia asked, ‘has your head cooled down yet?’ Her lecture made me quite sad.』

It seems the Sixth was quite a siscon.

Ahem, he purposefully cleared his throat, before speaking to me.

『Well, if you’re asking what I’m trying to get at here… right, even if you think you’re doing good, it may not be so in the eyes of another, and even if you know you’re doing wrong, some might see it as you doing good. There’s also the fact I wanted to show it to you some time around.』

He showed his embarrassing memories, and acted ashamed of them.

And he muttered to me.

『Yet I could only ever fail. In the end, I was a worse man than my father.』

❼

Before we were to depart, Gastone-san and Thelma-san brought a single young girl over to me.

Her name was【Aura】.

Gastone-san’s party had supported her in becoming the next Holy Maiden, and she was one of the candidates.

Her brown, long hair curled so much I felt that any more, and drills would naturally start to form. Her modest chest was, unlike Thelma-san, wrapped in the simple black uniform of a consecrated virgin, and not emphasized in the slightest.

A perfectly level body.

When they brought such a girl over to me, Clara stood, and took Eva and May out towards Porter's loading tray.

"I'll go check up on Aria-san."

"Got it."

Seeing the three of them part, Thelma-san spoke.

"It seems they're being mindful of us. But it is for the better."

And Gastone-san explained the situation to me.

"Lyle-dono, we are headed for Beim in order to allow the Holy Maiden Candidate Aura to flee. I'm sure you understand that our lives are in danger in Zayin. And having appraised your skills, I have a request to make. Could you offer shelter to our Aura-sama?"

"Shelter?"

Saying that, I looked at the girl called Aura. But when our eyes met, she averted her gaze.

Thelma-san cautioned her.

"Aura, you're being rude."

But Aura was…

"I'll have to decline. While he may be my life's savior, that was simply him working off his pay. I cannot bring myself to trust this adventurer; what's more, if we get all the way to Beim, I'll have you all let me free. I'm no longer relevant to the Holy Maidens, or the temple, or even Zayin anymore."

Seeing her turn to return with those words, the Fourth let his voice from the Jewel.

『The long-awaited Holy Maiden Candidate doesn't seem up for it. If she's going to be like that, even if you persuade her, you won't be able to put her up top. Though mr. lyle would surely be able to do something about it~.』

I ignored the second half of that, and looked at Gastone-san.

He looked quite apologetic, so I asked his situation.

“Putting Aura-san’s guarding aside, what will you two, and all the others do?”

Thelma-san hung her head, put her hand to her chest, and opened her mouth.

“We are all too involved. The next pursuers or perhaps the ones after will get to us eventually. To be quite honest, I never thought they would try to kill us so seriously. I was naïve.”

Gastone-san as well.

“She may be trouble. But Aura-sama isn’t a Holy Maiden or anything; she’s just a girl we lifted up. At the very least, I want her to find a different life, and find happiness of her own.”

From within the Jewel, the Sixth spoke.

『That’s wrong. The moment they lifted her up, she became just as involved. There’s no putting a stop to that one anymore. She’ll be targeted without a doubt.』

Both Gastone-san and Thelma-san were kind at heart. But as they were, there would surely be some things they wouldn’t be able to protect.

(… So that isn’t enough.)

I thought.

“Do the two of you plan on dying?”

Thelma-san shook her head. Her expression looked a little clouded to me.

“I’ve no intentions to die. But no matter where a former Holy Maiden such as myself were to go, I’d cause nothing but trouble. In that case, I’m thinking to find a home as far as I can. Gastone and the others are the same.”

I corrected my posture in front of the two of them. And I spoke with a serious expression.

“So you’re running away? I’m not sure it’s my place to say, but as things, are, Aura-san’s life will be targeted again. Rather than a former Holy Maiden, wouldn’t Aura-san be the greater threat to our enemy?”

“T-that is…”

Gastone-san looked quite troubled. He really was tired, and perhaps that was what was dulling his field of vision. Stuck in a corner, his mind felt cornered as well.

The Third spoke in an aloof voice.

『Oh? It looks like Lyle’s hopped on board. Was it because of the Sixth’s persuasion? What did you tell him?』

The Sixth made it short.

『We just talked a bit. Reminisced a little.』

I looked at the two before my eyes.

“If things keep going at this rate, won’t Zayin go through some horrible times? With Lorphys attacking, masses of uninvolved civilians may end up dead.”

Thelma-san looked down, and spoke regretfully.

“I understand that. But there is nothing left for us to do. Overbearing as it may have been, the Holy Maiden status was formally conceded. Gastone was driven out of his High Priest role as well.”

Gastone-san spoke to me. His small and slender fingers formed a fist.

“It’s not like we cast it aside because we wanted to. It’s just that there’s nothing we can do. We’ve no power left to hold back the divine knights or the other high Priests!”

I carried myself boldly. And I told myself.

(No, it’s possible. I’m able to do it.)

Pushing my right hand against my chest, I unreservedly spoke with

confidence.

“No, it’s possible. With the two of you, of course, and Aura-san… with the Holy Maiden candidate’s power, we can take back Zayin.”

Thelma-san raised her surprised face.

“T-take back? Lyle-dono, what are you saying? Zayin’s rule has been officially succeeded to the new Holy Maiden…”

“And isn’t that where the problem is? A needless war is to break out, and she’s trying to kill the Holy Maiden candidate, along with the rest of you. Am I wrong?”

Gastone-san spoke.

“T-that’s definitely the case, but what do you mean to do in taking it back? … Taking back an entire country isn’t something to be done with these measly numbers.”

I grinned, and went on.

“Want to try betting on me? Just leave it to Lyle Walt. You’ll end up betting your lives, but rather than waiting for untimely assassination, I think this bet would be much more worth your while.”

Thelma-san sent me a look, and took a step back. And with suspicious eyes, she asked.

“… What is your goal? Using us to rise up in the world? I thought you were a kind one, but it seems I had misread you.”

It seems I’ve gotten her to harbor distrust of me.

There, the Fourth offered me some advice.

『Lyle, just be honest here. But cover up a bit of it. Right, have her misunderstand. Don’t worry, the one that makes the misunderstanding is the one in the wrong. Listen, just repeat after me…』

As I pictured the Fourth’s scheming face in my head, I followed his lead.

“What I want is (the country of Zayin under) you.”

I tried heeding the Fourth’s words, but a little while after I said it, Thelma’s face turned bright red, and she began to panic. She looked between my face and Gastone-san’s in confusion.

“W-w-w-w-w-what do you think you’re saying!?”

I as well, the moment after saying it.

(OYYYyyyy!! What’s that supposed to mean! I just gave her the misunderstanding that I was a hopeless one, didn’t I!?)

While I was troubled, the Fourth spoke.

『Don’t panic! Right now, let her misunderstand, nod, and only correct the statement once she’s lost all escape routes! You may end up the enemy of all womankind, but it’s something necessary for the current Lyle!』

The Fifth was taken aback.

『Even if you’re my own father, you’re the worst. If mama was here, she’d definitely rain you with jeers.』

The Seventh too.

『You’re the worst. You’re making me see a future of Lyle being stabbed from behind. Okay, Lyle… how about you apologize here? You can’t just leave this sort of misunderstanding be.』

The Sixth as well.

『Lyle, correct it at once. Listen here, this is no good. I’ve failed in this one before.』

The Third.

『Fourth… Max, we’re going to have a long talk after this. Lyle, this is bad, so make sure you explain it, ‘kay?』

The Fourth spoke.

『Eh? Wait! I mean, after coming this far, getting another girl or two

doesn’t really make a difference! And if it’s Lyle, he should be able to…』

His voice became inaudible half-way through. So I gave a purposeful clearing of my throat.

“I-it seems I’ve made you misunderstand something. To be more precise, what I want is a reliable government in Zayin, as it had under your rule. If left alone, there are too many demerits to be had for an adventurer like myself.”

With a reddened expression, Thelma took a few deep breathes, and nodded a number of times.

“R… r… rrrrright, of course! B-but if there’s a battlefield to be found, don’t you adventurers make mwahneh?”

Thelma-san bit her tongue, but me and Gastone-san acted like it hadn’t happened.

I explained my own situation.

“The Guild I am associated with is a bit of a pain. I’m sure I’ll have to start explaining from there, but when there’s a war, the quota we have for fulfilling requests goes way up. That would be quite troublesome, so I want to keep the countries in this area at peace. I have other things going on as well, but leaving Zayin as it is would be troublesome. Because from what I’ve heard, there will be many more wars to come.”

Her panic rendered Thelma-san incapable of making rational decisions.

She seemed satisfied as she looked at me, and nodded. And wait, it didn’t seem much of what I was saying was actually entering her ears.

Gastone-san was the same. He was bewildered, and didn’t try to butt into the conversation.

“Well we can talk more about my circumstances on the trip, but how about we cool our heads a bit. Let’s talk some more during our next

break.”

Thelma-san’s face was still red.

“Right. That’s for the best. Otherwise, I can’t properly…”

Gastone-san too.

“W-well then, we’ll come again next time there’s a break to be had.”

And they parted as if to run away.

A strange sweat had broken out, and when I moved my hand to wipe it, I felt a stare from behind Porter. When I turned, I saw a pale-faced Aria peeking from Porter’s loading tray.

And my other comrades were peering this was as well from the golem’s shadow.

“Eek!”

I ended up giving a panicked retreat. Even when I didn’t do anything bad, why do I feel so much guilt and regret… this is all your fault, Fourth!

8 - The Outsider of the Basement

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[1]

We entered a break for lunch, had a light meal, and replenished our fluids.

Right around now, if Monica were here, it would be possible to prepare something extravagant, but for now, hard bread and water had to suffice. By the maid's words, we also ate a bit of salty preserved meats to replenish our salt levels.

While I sat on a nearby rock, May was wholeheartedly biting into a chunk of the hard, dried-out meat.

It was a non-perishable that didn't taste too good, May didn't seem to mind.

The ones we were to guard were resting in the shade of the trees. Eva and Clara were keeping watch, so Aria was also on break.

When I turned my eyes to the Holy Maiden candidate… Aura-san, I saw that Gastone-san was trying to persuade her.

"Aura-sama, we cannot run away forever. You need to be placed under protection somewhere."

Aura-san took a sip of water.

"And that somewhere has to be Lorphys? Then no. Even I know full well just how much they hate us."

Thelma-san also looked troubled, but she couldn't bring herself to pressure the girl too much. After all, it was her own efforts that had gotten Aura-san involved in all this.

(So the Holy Maiden candidate is that reluctant.)

And noticing my stare, Aura-san stuck out her tongue at me.

May laughed.

“Ahahaha, she sure hates you, Lyle. But why do you need another Holy Maiden anyways? If she doesn’t have the motivations, just have the other one do it.”

May’s opinion wasn’t wrong, but there was a reason Thelma-san was no good.

While doing her best, Thelma-san had lost in popularity to the current reigning Holy Maiden. That gap wasn’t a big one, but it’s still true she lost.

She then prepared a rival candidate in Aura-san, but the individual’s lack of motivation was what put more people on the current Holy Maiden’s side.

“Thelma-san’s that. She’s gotten too old for a Holy Maiden. See, they’re usually supposed to serve around ten years at most, but she did her job for more than twenty. She worked hard. It’s about time she got some rest.”

There, May looked at Thelma-san.

“From my point of view, they aren’t too different. They can both produce children, so isn’t it fine? Come to think of it, why did you seduce her?”

When May turned to me, I took a bite of the dried meat in my hands.

“… I didn’t seduce here. That was a misunderstanding.”

There, the Fifth let his voice from the Jewel. When May was around, he spoke up quite often.

『That was an unpleasant happening. We’ve had that man swear never to do it again, so fret not.』

Perhaps curious about my conversation, Clara and the others were peering my way from Porter’s shadow. And Thelma-san suddenly sensed something, and began to panic.

She didn’t hear the contents of the conversation, but such words

went right through Eva and May.

Eva spoke aloud of how she was happy she could write a song with this, and May complained that I should've just seduced her already.

"It sure is a pain. So, why does that make the younger one any better?"

I returned my eyes to Aura-san.

"The Holy Maiden is a sort of idol of worship, it seems. The last goddess… they revere the seventh goddess, but still, the country needed a representative. If they are to be a decoration, then a young and pretty girl would be best, or so I've heard."

The Holy Maiden's role was… a decoration.

But at some point, they had begun to gain authority, and so other countries interfered, and other countries were used, putting Zayin in the position it was in now.

The Fifth spoke.

『Aura would be the better one to put at the head. Even when negotiating with Lorphys, having a new representative would put you on a bit better terms. There's a possibility they won't be as wary. That doesn't seem to be how it'll go with Thelma.』

At present, our intentions were to join Lorphys' side, and take Zayin down. For that sake, we needed an individual to take up the role of, 'the legitimate successor of Zayin'.

(Once we return, we'll have to gather information again. Based on how it goes, it might not have to be Lorphys.)

If it was best to get a third party to intervene, that's what we'd choose. If nowhere looked like it'd work… we'd have to be a bit unreasonable.

The ancestors stated they wouldn't really recommend that one, so we weren't moving towards putting it to practice.

But to put it simply, we would have to proclaim independence for a

portion of Zayin with a large density of Aura-san's faction's supporters. On top of chipping away at their national power, we would be able to make a union with Lorphys in opposition of Zayin.

But with my goal in mind, it wasn't something to be too happy about.

I stood, and spoke to May as she finished her meal.

"We're departing. We'll arrive in Beim by tomorrow."

I said, as I thought.

(I have to think up a way to win Aura-san over. Should I rely on the Third?)

❼

… Beim.

It was a large building.

It seems it was once used by a wealthy merchant, but the adventurers deemed him too hard to work with, so it became hard for him to trade or give loans in the city.

Next to the mansion was a large storehouse, and it was easily able to fit Porter. With enough space for even a number of Porter units, Monica looked satisfied.

"There shouldn't be a problem if I make some noise here. There's some distance to the surroundings."

A splendid manor, with a vast yard, and large storehouse.

There was a certain reason they were able to get such a fine article. It was considerably inconvenient.

It was separated from Beim's central district, and on top of that, there was a rumor that late wealthy merchant was still loitering around somewhere in it.

In truth, it did feel there was something there, so Miranda and

Shannon had gone to the basement to deal with it.

Novem had started cleaning, and with all its blemishes, she saw how Monica and the others were able to purchase it so cheaply.

“It would be too much a pity to tear it down… I see… so many accidents occurred that no one wanted to buy it.”

Monica didn’t believe in ghosts, or the occult. But now was different.

“Hmph, since I’ve found myself in a fantasy world with magic, something like a ghost isn’t going to scare me at this point. But putting an end to it all before the Chicken Dickwad returns is I, Monica’s role… We really must exorcise these spirits.”

Monica took out some goods that looked like they would have a considerable effect, but looking at the water that had been sold as holy water…

“It’s just filthy water. The rest are all nothing but decorations. I tried gathering together some cheap things for effect, but it doesn’t look like it’ll do anything.”

But keeping them on her, Monica walked around the storehouse, and conducted a scan.

“… There seems to be some sort of hidden passageway. Even the storehouse has a basement to it, so there must be something beneath this mansion. I shall have to divulge its secrets.”

Shaking her twin tails, Monica seemed to be having fun as she walked forward. After finding the concealed entrance to go to a lower level, she wrenched it open with brute force, and descended the stairs.

Entering the dark basement, Monica happily hummed a tune…

❼

… Shannon was clinging onto her sister Miranda.

She held a lantern in one hand to light up the surroundings.

“F-FWAHAHAHA! I can see the invisible flow of magic! I can s-see right through all the traps t-that old merchant set!”

Miranda found it quite hard to walk, as she chucked the knife in her hands at the wall of the passage.

It hit into a switch, causing rusted spears to jut out from the walls. Their movements were dull, and a few of them were even snapped.

“It’s been left alone so long that it’s come to this. Now then, what could be in its depths?”

Shannon shook, but she spoke with bravado.

“I-I’m sure it’s the rich guy’s treasure! He was w-wealthy, so he must have quite a fortune!”

Even hearing that, Miranda didn’t seem all too interested.

All she wanted was to have the mansion in a usable state. And putting up strange expectations wouldn’t mean something would come out of it.

(You often hear about the rich ones and upstarts using their money to buy strange things. It’d be quite a laugh if he put all these traps to shelter what turn out to be a forgery.)

Hearing a sound from afar, Shannon held on tighter.

“Shannon, it’s getting hard to walk. And you haven’t been of any use this whole time.”

“But it’s scary! The presence of something that isn’t human is moving around! And we’re being watch, or how should I put it, this is definitely bad! That’s why I said it! That even if it was cheap, not to buy it!”

Shannon looked like she was going to burst into tears, so Miranda sighed, and firmly held onto her hand.

Walking on, she found yet another trap.

She threw her knife to get it moving, and after a strange noise

sounded, she confirmed that it was broken.

“Leave them for a few decades, and they stop moving, I see.”

She was interested in what sort of traps had been set, but after so many years, she determined there were few that would still function properly.

Not voicing any more problems about Shannon’s embrace, she started forward again.

“We really must confirm what’s in the basement. It’ll serve to kill some time before Lyle and the others get back.”

As Miranda walked on, Shannon looked around her surroundings warily as she clung on so tight there was no chance of the sisters being separated…

❼

… Inside the mansion.

Novem was busy cleaning the master’s study.

It was blatantly obvious that it would become Lyle’s room, so she was cleaning it quite carefully.

She opened the window and took a cleaning implement in hand, only for it to slam down with a bang despite the lack of wind.

Hearing the loud sound behind her, Novem showed not a hint of surprise as she proceeded to try opening the window again. This time, even though it wasn’t locked, it wouldn’t opened.

It felt as if it were being held down by something.

“I want to finish cleaning the main rooms by the end of the day… could you go play somewhere else?”

She turned from the window, and looked in the center of the room to find a plump man with violet skin.

He had a number of cocktail rings around his fingers, and a golden chain around his neck.

Before the mansion's master that was no longer of this world, Novem put down her cleaning supplies, and gave her greetings.

"Pleasure to meet you. My name is Novem… Novem Forxuz, if you will. I am the lover of Lyle-sama, who has purchased this mansion… no, that's wrong. The engagement has already been annulled. Vassal isn't quite right either. Now what shall I call our relationship? Yes, let us just leave it at Lyle-sama's loyal servant."

When she directed a smile, the black-robed man slowly began to rise into the air. A large scythe was held in his hands.

Seeing the figure before her, Novem could understand just sort of existence he was.

She narrowed her eyes.

"I thought all Outsiders had been eliminated, but it seems you collected up all the teachings you could find. Eternal youth isn't that good a thing to have, you know…"

Novem swiped her right hand, and gripped it around the Forxuz House's heirloom staff.

In search of eternity, magic stones and materials were gathered. And long ago, research was carried out to fuse man with monster itself.

None of that should have been known to the public. All the records should have been erased, but it seems the man who once lived in this mansion had grasped onto the clues, and experimented on his own body.

Having been left in a state where he couldn't research any longer, the former master lowered his scythe at Novem.

But Novem caught it with her left hand. She gripped the blade, and no matter how much power he put in, she wouldn't move an inch.

"I cannot simply ignore one who has dabbled in Outside Teachings.

At the very least, a painless…”

Novem let the staff in her right hand take the shape of her own scythe. That scythe that gave off a silver sheen traced a single line across her opponent’s abdomen.

The violet man opened his blackened mouth, and raised a scream. His body began to burn in a pale blue flame, leaving nothing but ash on the ground.

Watching the ash smoothly disappear into the floor, Novem reverted her scythe.

“So a little of him still remains.”

Saying that, she collected up her cleaning supplies, and decided to probe through the mansion again…

❼

… Miranda found Monica at the end of the basement passage.

“What are you doing?”

Seeing Monica in the pitch-black room with a book in her hands, Shannon was unable to raise a scream. She fruitlessly opened her mouth, and collapsed.

Miranda snatched the lantern from her hands, and looked around the room.

Monica was looking through the various books and documents.

“This is truly interesting research here. It seems there was a series of experiments carried out. You’ll find some jail cells further in, and there are traces that monsters were once kept there. Well, we can’t really make this one public, so we will have to dispose of it.”

Hearing that, Miranda understood that the wealthy man who once made a home here was carrying out some strange research. She narrowed her eyes, and held the lantern to the bookshelves on the wall.

Quite a few titles she was unfamiliar with were lined up, and there were even books in words she couldn't read. Beside them were the required dictionaries to read them.

There were a number of desks in the room, so there must have been a number of people working and researching here.

Placing the lantern on the desk, Miranda looked at the entrance to the room. Some footsteps could be heard coming from it, but neither she nor Monica felt like panicking.

Because they knew whose footsteps those were.

The one to enter the room was Novem.

"It looks like you've beat me to it. It does appear the master here had some unsavory hobbies of his own. We will dispose of all the books and documents here."

Her tone was stronger than usual, and her eyes that wouldn't permit dissent caused Miranda to shrug, and go over to Shannon.

Monica put the book down, and looked around.

"We can use this room. Could you leave the cleaning to me?"

Novem nodded.

"Please do whatever you like. However, everything that has been left in this room will be disposed of. The furniture as well."

Miranda spoke in sarcasm.

"Even when they've got some high class desks lined up?"

Without giving a response, Novem silently stared at Miranda. Miranda stroked her hair, let out a sigh, and nodded.

"Yes, yes, do what you will. Well, using what's been left in this room is a bit… we should just wipe it all out while we're at it."

Novem spoke.

"I don't think there's a problem with the mansion itself. But please

keep this matter a secret from Clara-san. Her attachment to books is a strong one."

Monica nodded. Miranda also agreed.

Shannon was… out cold, so no one tried asking for her opinion…

Notes

1. The term used here translated to outsider is one that refers to teachings outside one's religion.

9 - Determination

There wasn't much longer to Beim, and we were taking our final break.

The reason we rested a little separated from the main road was so travelers and peddlers, and other adventurers wouldn't be able to recognize that we were one party guarding another.

I don't think there were too many out there able to make it out at a glance, but there were no absolutes, so we took a break a little ways away.

(Though that's not all there is to it.)

Keeping wary of our surroundings, I turned my eyes to the carriages we were escorting. With the last attack, their exteriors were left in quite a state, but with a little servicing, they would work just fine.

Nearby, that attackers' horses were resting, loaded with the attackers' belongings.

From the Jewel, the Fourth spoke

『We'll have to leave the horses with someone, so the expenses will pile up. And if we aren't skillful in selling the equipment, the information will flow around. Maybe you should safe keep them for a while.』

I was of the same opinion. If it all ended with me thinking too much about it, then that's all and well, but if our opponent was persistent enough to search for us in Beim, there was no room for negligence.

The Sixth let his voice.

『Of course, if they wanted to find it out, there would be any number of ways for them to do it. Never think there'll be no way for them to trace you. Now then, before entering Beim, how about you…』

"KYAAAAAH!!"

Before the Sixth could finish, I heard a scream.

It was a woman's voice. Me and Eva, who was also on lookout, raced over, and there stood the injured man who we had come to the aid of. He had been out cold up to now.

He quietly mumbled to himself, as he held up a knife.

"… Aura… Aura…"

Perhaps she was in the middle of treating him, but the consecrated virgin nearby had fallen onto her back in fear. Behind her, Aura-san stood stock-still.

"W-why are *you*…"

She had an expression as if she couldn't believe something, and it seems her mind hadn't caught up the current situation.

(Her fatigue from unfamiliar travels must be at their peak as well. Ah, for now, I should…)

We weren't the only ones to run over.

Thelma-san and Gastone-san came as well, and they called for Aura-san to run.

"What are you doing!? Hurry and run away!"

Thelma-san grabbed Aura-san's arm, and shook her back to reality. The indivual herself successfully recovered from her confusion, but…

"Aurraaaaaaa!!"

The man jumped at Aura, and the virgin stepped up front. He pushed her aside with brute force, so Gastone-san stood out in front of Thelma.

"Guh!"

It looked as if a knife had pierced through his stomach.

I leapt forward, grabbed the man's arm, cast aside the knife covered in blood-like substance, and held him against the ground.

The man screamed out, as if under a spell.

“Auuraaaa!! Auraaaaa!!”

He cried out a number of times. A Skill that interfered with, and controlled one’s psyche. Whether it was the same as the Third’s, or only a similar one… whatever the case, the man was controlled by that Skill..

“Stay down!”

I restrained the struggling man, as Eva raced over to Gastone-san. Clara also came over to lend a hand to the consecrated virgin on the floor.

Aria and May kept watch.

Thelma-san went to Gastone-san’s side, and gripped his hand.

“Gastone!”

“T-Thelma-sama… so you’re safe.”

His breathe was rough, and as Thelma-san answered, ‘everyone besides you is uninjured,’ he seemed delighted.

Aura-san slowly wandered over to him.

Gastone-san looked as if he was forcing his smile.

“W-why did you cover for me? I’m… not a Holy Maiden candidate or anything anymore.”

There, Gastone-san…

“I apologize for getting you involved in this. But I’m glad you’re safe…”

As Thelma-san grasped Gastone-san’s chest, that blood-like substance flowed out in a steady stream.

His clothes were dyed a deep red.

Thelma-san laid Gastone-san down, and held onto his arm. Others began to gather around, and when they shed their tears, Aura-san’s

legs gave way beneath her.

I tied up the flailing man, and rendered him unconscious, before speaking.

“… We will take an extended break. Our party shall also assist in the burial services.”

Thelma-san…

“Thank you.”

And Aura-san, still collapsed on the spot, shouted out.

“What’s this… this is all because of your failure! Because you didn’t protect us! That’s why High Priest Gastone had to throw down his life, is it not!? If you took up the request, you should be risking your life protecting us! What’s this? What’s all this…”

Seeing the young Aura-san’s tears, my heart began to ache.

❼

… Thelma was with Aura in their carriage.

She sat on the right side, facing the front. Aura sat far on the left.

Lyle’s party was preparing a grave for Gastone, and Thelma had boarded the carriage in order to calm Aura down.

“Aura, don’t blame yourself.”

When Thelma said that, Aura’s tears started coming down in large droplets.

“I mean… I mean…”

From Aura’s point of view, there was no doubt that Gastone was just a High Priest using her. But it was also true how much he cared for her.

Even Thelma had been nothing but a merchant’s daughter at the start.

Aura was born into a poor knight household, being left in the custody of the temple when she no longer had any relatives left to look after her.

To the two of them, the Holy Maiden was nothing but the marionette of the High Priests. And within that all, Gastone had served them with all his heart.

No, perhaps that had all been to protect Zayin, but neither Thelma nor Aura could bring themselves to hate the man.

“Having managed to protect you, Gastone was satisfied. He was smiling, you know.”

Aura spoke.

“If that lot had done their work properly…! Then Gastone…!”

The day she had become a candidate for the Holy Maiden position.

Gastone had told her to drop any honorifics when dealing with him. In order to make clear their position as master and servant.

And Gastone had served her the whole time with that level of earnesty.

“Aura, it’s not as if Lyle-dono’s party had been negligent. Lyle-dono… had sensed the possibility that something like this would happen. He even insisted we kept as far away from that man as possible. But I was the one to push for it.”

Right, Lyle had requested his party be the one to look after the injured. Thinking back, he had likely predicted the possibility right from the start.

“Then he should’ve just out and said it! It’s because he…”

“Aura!”

When Thelma cried out, Aura’s body jerked in response, and she shut her mouth.

“… I’m sorry. But I knew this was going to happen.”

“Eh?”

Thelma closed her eyes, and indifferently went on. Inside the carriage, with her robe still partly stained red, she crossed her arms over her lap.

“Our lives would eventually be targeted. That’s precisely why we ran. I thought that the possibility would be lower for you. But you were the first one he tried to target. Originally, it would have ended with us alone.”

Aura looked at Thelma with a blank expression.

“… Then once you let me run, you, and everyone else would…”

Thelma hung her head.

“There would likely be nothing we would be able to do on our own. Run as we may, they would come to kill us. But I never thought you would be their highest priority.”

Thelma spoke from her heart.

The one targeted with the highest priority was Aura.

The Divine Knights… no, the one Zayin wanted dead was Aura.

Aura spoke.

“Then, it’s my fault Gastone…”

Thelma went on.

“It would have happened eventually. ‘Twas only a matter of sooner or later.”

Aura held both hands against her head, and gripped onto her hair. She looked as if she was about to tear it out, so Thelma took her hands, and stared into her face with a serious expression.

“Aura, when you get to Beim, you’re going to live a quiet life, right?”

“Thelma-sama?”

“I’m going to try struggling with those that remain. Luckily, Lyle-dono

has some connections. I've no idea how far we'll be able to go, but I'll make sure to direct Zayin's eyes my way."

Her words filled with determination were no fabrication.

Aura shook her head to the ide.

"Let's run together! I can't have you die as well. If it comes to that, then I'll have but another debt I cannot repay…"

In her messy tear-filled vision, her eyes caught a glimpse of the red stains on Thelma's robe.

Perhaps she imagined Thelma's death, as her expression was growing paler.

(Even if you may speak ill, you answered our expectations, and became a Holy Maiden candidate. You're truly a kind girl.)

She hurriedly rose to compete against the current Holy Maiden Remis. Had she the time, she may have even won.

But Thelma knew the girl herself had only become a candidate out of obligation to her.

"Aura, from here on, you should decide your own life."

"M-me?"

"That's right. You need to make the decision. If you're going to live quietly in Beim, then once we enter the city, we'll be nothing but complete strangers. I'll leave it to Lyle-dono to make sure you've got the arrangements to make a living. But do not get involved with us again. That will be for your sake."

"I don't want to. I don't want something like that!"

Aura put both her hands around Thelma, and Thelma embraced her in return.

"It's fine to run away. If you choose to fight, what awaits you is surely a crueler road… both me and Gastone only desire your happiness."

Aura raised her face to look at Thelma. Her eyes were reddened, and her mouth fastened shut. It seems she was holding back her tears.

“I… don’t want to part anymore. I don’t… want to lose any more family. Mother…”

Thelma kindly patted her head.

“Even when I told you not to call me that anymore… ever since you were small, you were always such a spoiled one.”

She gave a bitter smile. Thinking of their age difference, they really could be mother and child.

In all actuality, the age gap was only a little less than Lyle and his own mother.

Gently separating herself from Aura, Thelma spoke with a smile.

“We’ll reach Beim by the end of the day. Aura, you have to choose. It’s you’re life, you know.”

Aura cast her eyes down once, before wiping off her tears, and raising her face.

“I will fight. As a Holy Maiden candidate, as one concerned, I will fight. So please don’t leave me behind.”

Thelma’s face turned serious.

“Are you fine with that? You won’t regret it? A quiet life has it’s own happiness to be found.”

Aura’s face was just as serious.

She had already resolved herself.

Thelma nodded, motioned Aura to disembark from the carriage, and spoke.

“… I’m sure they’re already done with their work. Aura, come down, and wash your face. You can’t be showing such a look to Gastone, can you? And you must tell everyone your decision.”

Aura nodded, opened the carriage door, and jumped down.

Thelma watched her back with a smile. It was truly a motherly smile.

But…

"… Eh?"

When Aura reached the outside world, her face cramped up, and froze…

❼

There were two doors on the carriage.

In front of the left door, we applauded Aura-san as she disembarked.

Aria and I, as well as Clara, Eva, May, and everyone involved.

Alongside us, the consecrated virgins who came alone, and others concerned.

The man who was flailing about before was also clapping with a smile.

Gastone-san looked quite delighted.

"Aura-sama, so you've finally made your decision?"

Seeing him break into tears, there were a few others who ended up crying as well.

But the girl herself… Aura-san had frozen up as if she'd seen something she couldn't believe.

When Thelma-san jumped down beside her, Aura-san grabbed her.

"You tricked me!?"

"How rude. I have done no such thing! In truth, that man was injured, and unconscious, and it's true that his mentality was interfered with. Lyle-dono got rid of it beforehand. But the one he tried to aim for

first really was you… Aura. And the possibility of me or Gastone dying is still as high as ever. Bringing you around as you were without resolution was making me uneasy. And if we didn't go this far, you'd think up an excuse, and would never have spoken your true feelings. How many years do you think we've known one another?"

Thelma-san looked at the man who'd been thrashing about, and he scratched his head in embarrassment.

The voice I ignored from the Jewel came from the Third.

『Ain't my Skill amazing? If it can brainwash people, then of course it's possible to dispel brainwashing.』

With the Third's Skill, we were able to disarm the man who'd become a human trap.

So we had him put on an act, and borrowed some blood-like substance from Monica's bag of tricks prepared to kill some time.

(But telling him his comrades had died… and then having him put on that act. That one was also a painful one.)

From my consultation with the Third, that was the means we'd selected, but…

The Fifth laughed.

『Even your terrible personality's showing up in your Skill. Though it worked out well this time.』

The Third and Fifth laughed, as if to threaten one another.

The Seventh spoke to me.

『Now then, Lyle… it's about time to disclose the trick.』

I took a step forward, and spoke to Aura-san.

"In order to make you serious, I directed a play. By the way, if you refused, you'd have been motioned to go out the right-side door, where'd you'd find a fake grave. While you prayed for him, Gastone would have been sent ahead to Beim. But you've shown your

resolve! We will support you with all we have!”

When I said that with a smile, Aura-san returned the smile as she walked up to me.

The reason I purposely said it in an irritating way was to make her direct her dissatisfaction at me.

It would be troublesome if she started hating Thelma-san or Gastone-san, after all.

Having the help of all three of them was an absolute necessity.

“I see. So you mean to say I’ve been dancing on the palm of your hand? I thought you looked unreliable, but you’re looking more promising now, Mr. Adventurer.”

We both smiled and laughed, before my conversation partner raised her fist into the air, and slammed it into my body.

I had underestimated it as the fist of a young girl, but it seems my appraisal had been mistaken. The movements of her body were smooth, and her fist without a shred of hesitation pounded into my stomach.

“Gahah!”

The impact rang through my insides, and I spat out the air in my lungs before collapsing onto my knees.

(When I told her I was the one behind the curtains, I thought I would get a slap or two, but for her to go for the solar plexus…)

She had even added in the motion of her hips, and on that splendid blow, I forcefully formed a smile.

“S-splendid body blow.”

There, Aura-san continued smiling as she looked down over me, and pointed her thumb at the ground.

“Very well. I shall take part in your plan. You’ve been able to fool me splendidly. And if you can do that much, then perhaps I can place a bit of expectations on you.”

From the Jewel, the Fourth let his voice.

『This angle… that fist… you're bringing back memories of my wife.』

The Sixth.

『Well she looks resolved enough. Now then, we've gotten all the cards we wanted in our hands. Lyle, it's starting to get fun.』

(… It's starting to get painful for me.)

When I put all my effort into my smile, Aria beside me muttered.

"Lyle, you're trying too hard…"

It seems she was empathizing with me.

Eva spoke.

"I think I'm going to cut out this scene. Let's just try to spin it as an emotional one."

She was taking memos to turn it to song. And hearing that, Clara…

"You should be firm when you're making records. Decisions like that cause chaos for scholars down the road."

"Like I care. I just want them to listen to the song. There's no need for unnecessary truth. You've got to please the customers."

"That's your take on the matter. I don't think it's good to decide it so arbitrarily. It's because elves are like that, that so many scholars are still fighting over the meaning behind folk songs."

It doesn't seem she would forgive Eva cutting this scene. If you wanted to ask if it was Clara-esque, it was. So they both took their memos, and clashed their opinions.

May looked over us from afar.

"Humans sure are a pain."

And said that. But I…

(I think so too.)

10 - Worse than Zayin

Having arrived in Beim, I went to the Guild alone to report on our requests.

Putting off selling materials and magic stones to tomorrow, I went to the showers within the Guild building, and washed off the sweat and dirt.

After going under that lukewarm unpressurized shower a while, I got myself together, and headed towards the receptions desk.

If possible, I wanted Tanya-san, but if she wasn't there, I hoped for a receptionist abundant in experience. I never really thought about which line to join in Beim before, but this time, I tried confirming who was at the counters today before choosing a line.

Around, I could hear the gossip of the day.

"Did you hear? Quite a number of mercs are hopping onto Zayin's side."
"It's because Zayin's always permitted pillage n' plunder. Heard Lorphys' princess is a stiff one in that regard."
"Not interested in that stuff, or so it goes."
"That Alette, you know? It seems she's been going around to all the skilled mercenary brigades."
"Them knights sure have it hard."

Laughing adventurers.

Thinking about Alette-san's situation wasn't something too pleasant for me. But expecting that much camaraderie among adventurers was no good.

And the party that usually accompanied her around was, rather than a mercenary brigade, an adventurer party that was strong in Labyrinths.

I'm not really sure how they'd fare on the battlefield.

From the Jewel, the Sixth let his voice.

『So she's gathering aid? If she hasn't gone home yet, then that's convenient for us. Lyle, how about getting in contact? Covering up the matter with Aura and co., of course.』

Right now, I don't know what sort of reaction Alette-san would give.

For Lorphys, they were from a troublesome country that gave a petty false accusation to attack.

I gripped the Jewel, and moved forward in my line.

"… There are fewer people than usual."

As I looked around, and got such an impression, a different group of adventurers lined up behind.

"Oy, the guys from the South Branch called out to me, but what do you lot think?"
"So the mercs are recruiting? It's getting real here."
"Does Zayin have the upper hand? Then just say, 'if you're fighting for Zayin, then why the hell not?' Why don't you?"
"Fool. In that case, Lorphys will be willing to even go into debt to get mercenaries on their side. Lorphys's going to start looking more profitable, just you wait."

The Seventh spoke up. In a voice filled with anger.

『This is why you can't trust adventurers at all!』

I let out a light sigh, as I took note of more signs that war was approaching.

❼

When my turn came around, I sat in the chair, and handed my documents over to Tanya-san.

As always. After she took the papers, I presented my Guild Card, and she spoke a bit as she started into the required paperwork.

“A safe and steady【B】evaluation, is it? As I thought, your party is a proficient one. Come to think of it, you guys purchased that haunted house, but is everything alright?”

Hearing about a haunted house, I tilted my head.

Tanya-san said something along the lines of, ‘oh, you’ve just gotten back so you don’t know,’ as she sent some eyes of pity my way.

The paperwork finished, I accepted the documents, and my Guild Card before opening my mouth.

“Tanya-san, the truth is, there was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

I spoke in a serious expression. And on hearing my voice, her face turned from a smile to a serious one as well.

“… This isn’t the best place. So be it. Supporting skilled adventurers is a receptionist’s job. I’ll have to swap out the counter, so please wait on the second floor.”

When I nodded, Tanya-san called out to a staff personnel filing papers in the far back.

“【Rühe】, I leave this desk to you. I’ve got business to attend to.”

“Eh? W-wait senpai!”

Perhaps because he had risen from his seat in such a hurry, his papers fell on the floor, amplifying the new guild receptionist’s panic. I got out of the line, and headed for the second floor.

She didn’t exactly tell me where to wait, but I saw her come up the stairs not long after.

Her walking posture, and atmosphere… perhaps it was the case that Tanya-san used to be an adventurer.

She told me to enter one of the conference rooms, so I followed her words.

(It’s the first I’ve been in one of these since that introductory seminar we took when we first got to Beim.)

I thought, as I arbitrarily sat in a seat, and Tanya-san sat in front of me. She was directing a smile, but the air around her seemed somewhat sharp.

“Now then, you called me out, so it must be something adequately important. If it’s a confession, then please stop right there. I’m in the middle of work.”

“Oh so I have a chance when you’re off the clock? … That was a joke.”

Even with her smile, her eyes narrowed. I apologized, and began to speak.

“I have something to consult with you. Alette-san is still in Beim, isn’t she?”

“… I cannot say.”

When Tanya-san said that, I nodded. I could go look for her if I wanted, and that wasn’t where the problem lay.

I gripped the Jewel, and…

“The truth is, on the return trip from the request, I ended up lending a helping hand. I took up a guard request of my own accord, and it doesn’t seem I will be able to carry out guild requests for a while.”

Tanya-san looked at my face as she rested both her elbows on the table, and locked her hands. In front of her face. She did it in a way as if to hide the area around her mouth.

“… So you accepted a personal request. Adventurers are free to do so. Well, it’s true we’d prefer you took it through the Guild. Personally, I hope you accomplish it safely, and go back to accepting Guild requests. Yes, that is my hope… so is that the end of it?”

Is that all you called out to me for? That was the sort of atmosphere she gave off, and while I couldn’t see her mouth, her attitude indicated it was surely smiling.

I ended up giving a bitter smile.

Her gaze shifted a little, so I apologized.

“My apologies. From here on’s the main matter. How should I put this, I’m a bit troubled.”

“Troubled?”

I looked straight at Tanya-san, and spoke with a smile.

“A High Priest of Zayin, the former Holy Maiden, as well as the former Holy Maiden candidate who went against the current one. That is who I’ve ended up helping. The contents of the requests are to, ‘return Zayin to its rightful rulers,’ but I’m a little hard-pressed to go about it alone. So won’t you discuss it a bit with me?”

My smile caused her face to cramp up. Her locked fingers hid it, but I could tell from the movements of the rest of her face.

And undoing her hands, and taking her elbows off the table, Tanya-san corrected her posture. She let out a sigh, and look at my face.

“I see. That one’s beyond me. Well, it’s worthy enough for calling me from work, or should I say I’m glad we didn’t discuss it at the desk. But…”

“But?”

Tanya-san spoke disinterestedly.

“The Guild will not support either side. Whether it be for Zayin or for Lorphys, if the request comes to the Guild, they’ll process it all the same. It’s impossible to gain its cooperation for one side. I recommend you don’t bring up this topic too much elsewhere, Lyle-kun.”

Hearing Tanya-san’s opinion, the Fifth in the Jewel…

『Meaning the guild will happily have the two fight on as they make money. It’s the capital of merchants as well, so such is to be expected.』

The capital of merchants and mercs… that was Beim. There are plenty of industries that make money precisely because war exists,

and when battle comes, their merchandise will fly off the shelves.

Joining one side, and putting an end to it, wouldn't be in the Guild's best interest. Because the merchants were the ones ruling the city.

I don't think the Guild would be able to go against them. No, the Guild itself could even be called a merchant company dealing in Magic Stones.

However.

"Then that's a relief. The guild will be impartial, you say?"

"… Reluctant as I may be to say it, that's how it is."

Perhaps she thought I was being sarcastic, as she stood from her seat. But I called out to stop her.

"That's not the end of the conversation."

"Did you want to seal my lips?"

Even if she said she wouldn't say anything about, that doesn't guarantee she wouldn't report. I was carrying around a spark of war, after all.

(And it's not something as small as mithril.)

When Zayin arbitrarily started a war over something so petty, there's no way they would be able to ignore the sparks I carried.

"No. I don't feel like sealing any lips. I was only glad that the Guild would be impartial."

From inside the Jewel, I heard a delighted Third's voice.

『Really, a blessing they'll be impartial. Though it would be fine either way!』

The Fourth also spoke.

『Well, if you're gathering manpower, you really will have to rely on the Guild.』

I continued on.

“I want to give a personal request myself. I want to offer a request to the party of【Creit Benini】.”

Tanya-san seemed to understand what I was thinking. She put her left hand to her forehead, and looked at me in an irritated manner.

“Well, the right person in the right place, they say… it definitely seems like a request he’ll like.”

“I’ll bet.”

So I descended back down to the first floor with Tanya-san, and filled out the paperwork to submit a request.

❼

… ‘Tahnia’ gave a report about Lyle in her higher-up’s office.

Her superior continued processing his work as he lent an ear to her words.

“That so? He picked up the former Holy Maiden? I can’t really praise someone for picking up everything they find, but he’s sure found a big one.”

Her superior smiled, but Tahnia did not.

“Should we report it to the Main Branch?”

There, her superior shook his head.

“And why should we? It’s not like it’ll put an end to war. More so, however he moves may even magnify its scale. Oh, if it comes to that, would it be bad that I didn’t report it? Yep, let’s put a word in after all. It’s not like they’ll do anything about it.”

Tahnia… was Tanya’s name while on Sweeper duty.

If there was a call to capture, or perhaps assassinate the former Holy Maiden in Lyle’s custody, then she would immediately spring to action.

But her superior was a different story.

“He hasn’t asked for safe haven from us. Assistance-wise… well, he’s asked for some, has he? If it’s a request, then why not just carry out the normal request procedures?”

He didn’t sound interested. More than that, he didn’t seem to think it would influence anything too much.

“Are you certain? If it becomes a larger matter, or it puts the Guild at a loss…”

“It won’t. And there are more than enough requests coming to the mercenary South Branch as it is. It’s not like Zayin and Lorphys are the only places to make money. The mercenaries are already moving. Skirmishes have already broken out on the border. Supplies are already selling. A few are even putting all the rare metal they’ve stockpiled on the market. Good grief, just what are the adventurers doing?”

The higher-up man didn’t like to see adventurers acting like merchants.

(Albano’s party, huh? I heard they had gotten some rare metal iron in the last Labyrinth.)

Tanya thought a bit, as she reported there were no major problems as a whole.

“Tahnia, we are people of the East Branch. Making things profitable for the Guild is important, but how about we look where our feet are planted? If the adventurers don’t return in good time, our requests will hit a flat tire. Even if we find a Labyrinth, there’s be no one to send. Isn’t that bad? And you see, the Guild is there to make it big in Magic Stones.”

Magic Stones wouldn’t really come in during war, he sighed.

Upon hearing she wouldn’t have to take any action against Lyle’s party, Tahnia felt relieved.

Her superior.

“And I’d really like to get them in our favor. I want to end the war quickly. Otherwise, the other branches will start complaining we aren’t doing any work again.”

Before her joking boss, Tahnia finished her report, and turned to leave the room. But she was stopped.

“Tahnia, if you can get someone in your debt, then do it. I don’t want to part with skilled adventurers. As long as it doesn’t put the Guild at a loss, that is.”

Looking back at her superior, Tahnia gave a single bow, before walking out the door.

(Could it be, I’m being tested?)

Returning to Tanya, she thought that outside the room…

❼

In the mansion Novem and the others had found, I received the report from Rauno-san.

He was clean-shaven, and he hadn’t drunk a drop, so he looked like a completely different person.

“Now then, this is the situation on Zayin you’ve asked for.”

I scanned through the report, and nodded.

(It’s pretty much the same as what I’ve heard from Gastone-san and Thelma-san.)

Having been able to prove Rauno-san’s skill level, I proposed my next request.

“I’ll take my time going through the report later. Now onto the next request.”

“… Next? I’ve already given Miranda-chan what I got on Lorphys.”

Lorphys. They were carrying a bomb greater than I’d anticipated,

and I was hesitant to make use of them. In a single word, terrible.

Worse than Zayin.

Terrible enough to account for Alette-san's troubled predisposition, and then some. Not happening.

"No, next I'd like you to gather information on Selva."

"Selva? To my knowledge, they're the ones showing the least amount of movement. They're waiting and watching. Well, if you want to call them ominous, I won't argue."

Rauno-san also thought them suspicious.

From the Jewel, I the Fourth let his voice.

『Lorphys only has a single princess. But that kid has a prince she's engaged to, so why isn't the guy even trying to help… And according to Gastone, the current Holy Maiden is of Selvian descent.That gets all the players together.』

I heard the Fifth's voice.

『Lorphys and Zayin. And Selva… just what could they be thinking. Personally, I'd like to support the Selva's behind the curtains theory.』

The Seventh laughed.

『No, no, they're a possibility Zayin's Holy Maiden is just being put to work by them.』

The Sixth.

『It may be that both countries are just playing parts in their own play. Beat up Lorphys, withdraw, then have Selva pretend to rush in to give aid, and then take over the government just like that.』

The Third spoke.

『Eh~? In that case, even if they didn't do anything, sending over that princy fiancé would already achieve that effect. From my point of view, the Guild's behind the curtains theory is the most interesting one. All the wars in this area were a result of the Guild moving

behind the scenes!』

When he said that, the other ancestors.

『Hahaha, nice one.』

『Well, they'll make money, so I'm sure they're at least moving *something* behind the scenes.』

『Fifth, that would be the merchants. The Guild's a bit different.』

『Same old, same old. They're merchants of Magic Stones. But, well…』

Their opinions on the matter were aligned.

And in regards to that, I felt like agreeing.

The third acted as proxy for what they were all thinking.

『Lorphys' princess is the only one without a 'behind the curtains' theory.』

When I sighed, Rauno-san looked at my face.

"What's wrong? I don't think you'll find anything that'll give you a bigger headache than Lorphys."

"No, that's too low a level for comparison. Zayin is also plenty strange."

When I said that, the third laughed.

『Lyle, you sure are stupid. There isn't a single decent country in the world. Everyone's got something strange somewhere in them.』

Hearing that, the other ancestors laughed.

(Wow, my head really does hurt…)

11 - The Fourth Camp

I decided to make a large alteration to our objective.

(Dammit, if Lorphys' princess wasn't so bad, we would've just attained victory on Lorphys' side.)

Lorphys, who found mithril in the Labyrinth.

Zayin, who claimed it was a gift to them from their Goddess.

That was what the start of war looked like to the public eye.

But there, a third country… the kingdom of Selva comes out.

Looking at the numerous pieces of information.

Selva's prince, and Lorphys' princess… an only daughter, were engaged.

Zayin's Holy Maiden was a former noble daughter of Selva.

The country had connections to both sides, and yet that third power showed not a single movement on the surface in this war. That was Selva.

The living room of the manor Novem had purchased, and that was in the middle of renovations to receive us.

I sat in a chair facing a table, and spoke with the voices of the Jewel.

"They're a suspicious one no matter how you look at it, but can we really do anything about this third country?"

On my voice, I heard a response from the Jewel I had placed on the table. It was the Sixth.

『Fret not. Luck has blessed you with a number of cards to play. A former Holy Maiden, a former High Priest, a knight of Lorphys… and a former Holy Maiden candidate. Think about the information that

comes in, and choose where you should be aiming for.』

Where should we bring the outcome of the war? That was quite a hard problem for me.

There, I sensed a presence, took the Jewel in my hands, hung it around my neck, and closed my mouth.

The Third spoke.

『Oh my, she's already here.』

I heard some footsteps gradually getting closer. I turned my chair towards the door, as a somewhat violent knocking sound came from it.

"Come in."

When I said that, the door was roughly forced open.

Entering the room was an out of breath Shannon. Her breathing was all over the place, as she turned to me, and opened her mouth.

At first, her voice wouldn't come out as she wanted, so after a bit of silence.

"Lyle… there's a visitor for you."

Seeing her tired face, I smiled.

"Oh, I see. This mansion sure is vast."

I laughed and stood, as Shannon, who was getting a bit of a remedy for her lack of exercise glared at me in resentment.

"Then just sell it off already! I'm too scared to sleep at night, yet no one even brings up the thought of selling it! People call it a haunted house, you know!"

We purchased a famous haunted house in Beim, but a few days had already passed since I first got here. Nothing particularly strange had happened.

I'm sure the rumors just led to embellishment.

According to Novem, there was a dungeon in the basement, so perhaps that was the cause of some rumor.

“Even so, Alette-san moves quickly.”

I took Shannon along, and left the room. I got the feeling she was keeping strangely close to me, but that must be because she was scared to be in the mansion alone.

When the shortened distance made it quite hard to walk, the Sixth spoke.

『Lyle, hold her hand.』

I thought it would be better than trying to move with this strange closeness, so I held my hand out to her.

She mulled over it a bit, before taking it in her own. So we walked down the corridor together, and headed towards the room prepared for guests.

After thinking over it a long while, Shannon spoke.

“I-I’m sure you’re scared, so I don’t mind holding your hand, okay!”

She said that, so…

“Yes, yes, many thanks.”

When I gave a spirit-less response, she began complaining under her breath. I listened to them, as I thought over how to proceed talks with Alette-san.

(Now then, how will Lorphys treat us?)

Walking down the hallway, with sunlight streaming in through the windows, I worried for our future.

❼

The reception room of the manor.

Sitting on a sofa, with a table between us, I faced Alette-san.

Diagonally behind her, her adjutant stood with splendid posture, Monica took that same position behind me after she finished putting out the tea.

I really wonder why the maid was standing in the background.

(She's definitely mistaken about something.)

Complaining a bit about Monica, I was about to start up conversations with Alette-san. However, she was the first one to open her mouth.

"I heard you hired Creit. Could you be intending to participate in the coming war?"

I sipped my tea, saw she was looking downwards, and nodded.

"If you'll be on our side, we're acquaintances. You'll receive some favorable treatment. But if you'll be on the enemy camp, we'll show no mercy on the battlefield."

She sounded quite calm, but her atmosphere was somewhat sharp.

"We will be joining in. And if you're asking which camp we'll be in… well, I'm thinking of participating in my own personal fourth camp. How's that sound?"

The cup in her hands stopped, and she directed her field of vision at me. I continued with my explanations.

"On the return trip from a request, we picked up a large cargo. It ended up leading to us taking on a personal request, but in that case, rather than attaching ourselves to any side, it made the prospects of forming a fourth camp look more favorable."

When I said that with a smile, Alette-san made a serious expression.

"Us and Zayin… it's a problem of two countries, is it not?"

Right. That's what I thought at first. But that third party was behind Lorphys, waiting for them to weaken, or perhaps be erased altogether.

I…

“Let’s skip the minor details. At first I was thinking to participate on Lorphys’ camp. But that made me feel much too anxious. The royal princess… I don’t want to be the one to say it, but she’s quite awful.”

… When I said that, the adjutant’s expression turned sharp.

Alette-san held up her hand to calm him.

“… It seems you’ve heard a strange rumor or two, but our royal princess is a beautiful and wise one. The current war is quite a pain on her heart. If it were to let us evade war, then just give the mithril away, she said. If it were for the sake of her people, then she would not mourn the loss of fortune.”

Lorphys had lost its king and queen, while the princess was an only child.

They were a small country, and they had their branch families with stake to the throne, but the royal princess was the one named as the successor. However, she had yet to be enthroned as queen.

It was in a dubious position.

That was the current state of Lorphys.

Alette-san confirmed with me the details of the third camp.

“Very well. Lyle-kun, you seem to believe there’s already a third camp, but where will they come out? I’d definitely like to hear that. I’ve heard you used information dealers to collect a considerable amount of intel, after all.”

She held the info that I was collecting info.

It’s true I didn’t really care about hiding that fact when I collected it up.

“… I’m thinking of Selva as the third party. They will come out when Lorphys is exhausted to an extent. They’ll either hammer the final nail in the coffin, or offer some condescending assistance. I don’t know which yet.”

Alette-san breathed out a sigh.

Her adjutant was about to say something, but she waved her left hand dismissively to shut him up. Looking at me, she drained whatever remained in her cup of tea, and opened her mouth.

While Monica moved to give her a refill.

“That’s right. Selva is also moving. But we’re trying to do something before they can make their move. It seems you’ve investigated a bit, but sticking your head too far in will shorten your lifespan.”

Those words could have been taken as a threat, but I shrugged my shoulders, sat deeper into the sofa, and continued my piece.

“I’d like to make a few requests. A meeting with Lorphys’ crown princess. Zayin’s former Holy Maiden Thelma-san, and the former High Priest Gastone-san. Finally, the former Holy Maiden candidate Aura-san. I’d like a meeting for the three of them.”

On my words, Alette-san made a face of surprise.

“That would be Zayin’s moderate faction. Quite a find… I see, you’ve picked up quite an outrageous package yet again. If you’ll leave them with us, we’ll be considerably grateful.”

I shook my head.

“I already accepted their request. And we’ll be having them hide for a while.”

“What do you plan to do by meeting? You’ll be aiding our side, I’m sure?”

On Alette-san’s words, I nodded.

“I do want Lorphys to be the winning side. And Zayin has a lot coming to them. They should go through a bit of pain. While we’re at it, I’d like to take Selva down a notch.”

Alette-san made a perplexed expression.

“… For that, I’m thankful. But what exactly is your goal? Are you trying to build up a mercenary brigade? Rather than succeeding, I get the feeling the possibility of failure is greater in this instance.”

I directed a smile at her.

“Oh, we’ll win. And the preparations for that, are this time’s meeting. I will assist Lorphys, and lead them to victory in the coming war. Well, there will be two countries on the winning side, though.”

“Two countries?”

When she said that, Ispoke with a smile.

“So what will you do? Will a meeting with us and her highness be possible?”

Making a conflicted expression, Alette-san…

“All I can do is give a report. I’m not in a position to make a decision. It could be the case that an order will come to capture you by all means.”

Seeing her give a fearless laugh, I spoke.

“And when it comes to that, I’ll just be moving to Zayin.”

❼

When Alette-san left the mansion, I went into the next preparations.

The hall on the first floor had plenty of space, and we would be holding an inaugural meeting there.

We hurriedly moved to make it presentable, put out tables, and lined up food and ale.

Novem and Monica prepared dishes one after the next, while Miranda, Aria, and Clara put them out.

May looked like she’d lay her hands on the food, so Shannon was keeping watch over her.

And Eva was…

“It’s fine if I sing a light song, right?”

“Right. One that rouses the spirit would be nice.”

In the hall I’d prepared, I heard the details of the song from Eva. In order to make things livelier, I asked her to sing.

“… I don’t like how I’m not the main act, but I guess all’s well as long as I can sing. How many can we expect?”

She seemed a little unsatisfied, but seeing the number of tables lined up, she ended up asking that.

“Ah, right. I never told you. You were out shopping, and you helped prepare the outfits.”

So while everyone was busy preparing, I informed Eva.

“The ones coming are Creit-san’s party, and other dreamer adventurers hoping to hop on board this story. Creit-san’s acquaintances as well. Small parties, and ones formerly knights of some other country are coming as well. Speaking to the scale, around a hundred, perhaps?”

We scraped up all we could, and at present, that was out limit.

“… So you gathered up a hundred? And you’re going to be picking a fight with Zayin without borrowing Lorphys’ power? Even if you plan on directing a small force with tactics, you’ll be fighting with those numbers alone?”

I smiled.

“Don’t worry. That includes support, so the ones who can fight are less than half that. Equipment won’t make it in time, so this time, it’ll count for around thirty people.”

Eva seemed taken aback as she looked at me. The enemy numbered in the tens of thousands, so there was no helping it. Because with that, us included, we would be bringing the fight with force of around forty.

I understand why she felt like making light of it.

“I-it’s alright. Believe in me. Even like this, I’m a man who doesn’t do

the impossible.”

Shen I said that, she let out a light sigh.

“I’d prefer it you said that with an expression filled with confidence. Like the one you had not too long ago. Well, I decided to follow along, so I won’t oppose. And if you succeed, there’s no doubt it’ll be a hero’s tale. I’ll just add this on, but please don’t die before you confess. I’m really looking forward to it.”

When she teased me at the end, I felt my face redden, and averted my eyes.

And Thelma-san and Aura-san came over to us.

They were wearing Monica’s homemade garments, creating quite an atmosphere. Wearing those white dresses that looked as if they were stuck fast on their bodies, both of them seemed embarrassed.

Aura-san…

“Hey, what is that maid of yours thinking!? Clothes like these that show off so many lines… what’s more, she called our normal clothing uncharitable!”

Seeing what Monica had put Thelma-san and Aura-san… as well as the rest of the consecrated virgins in, I had a single thought.

“Putting the virgins in sister uniforms… she’s definitely mistaken about something.”

But when I told her that, she merely replied, ‘you are the one who doesn’t get it.’ And when she made outfits for High Priest Gastone-san, and the girls, they were all quite showy.

Thelma-san spoke shyly.

“This one is a bit too embarrassing. Is there nothing to drape over it?”

Seeing her fidget, Eva…

“Isn’t it fine? It barely shows any actual skin. I’d have increased the exposure level myself.”

Quite a few of Eva's stage outfits were quite extreme. No, wait, she didn't have many, but all of them were extreme.

Aura spoke in irritation.

"Don't ruin the Holy Maiden's image! That maid scoffed when she looked at my chest!"

Seeing her cover up her reserved chest with her right arm, I looked at the ornaments on her arms and head. Everything Monica produced was of superb craftsmanship.

A few of them were bought and worked in, but her touch was splendid.

"No, Monica was in a hurry, and there's no more time, so there's nothing we can do. And Gastone-san looks kinda satisfied."

We directed our eyes towards Gastone's advance into the hall.

He was wearing the outfit that'd been made for him, and as it was for male usage, it had little exposure, but it was still flashy. His hat was narrow and long, while his robes looked spacious. He seemed quite satisfied with his white and blue High Priest attire.

According to the man himself, it was more comfortable to wear than what he usually had to put on. Apparently.

(Monica is too multi-purpose. If she can finish up modifying Porter, we'll be done with all the preparations. We'll have to hurry up with preparing for Zayin's side.)

So we hurried to prepare the party… the inaugural assembly, and I verified something with Thelma-san.

"Ah, sorry to change the subject, but make sure you take care of that matter."

Thelma-san looked towards me, and nodded.

"Without a doubt. In the first place, if you're going to attain victory with this number of troops, that's enough reason to get you in government. By the way, are you really planning to march into war

with fifty soldiers? I'm an amateur in that field, but I don't think taking down a large force with few numbers is as easy as the fairy tales make it."

Aura-san stuck her glare on me.

"How much war experience do you have?"

Her eyes were doubtful, and perhaps because she was wearing an outfit she detested, she was taking it out on me.

I gripped the Jewel once.

"Well, a considerable amount. And it's not like I'm going to be fighting an army of ten thousands, you know. I'm not going to march on the main battlefront."

Hearing that, both Aura-san and Thelma-san made faces of surprise.

Eva alone was…

"Hey wait, then even if I put it to song, it's not going to be very exciting."

She seemed quite disappointed.

12 - Holy Knight Brigade

Holy Knight Brigade

In the entrance hall used for the inaugural assembly, over a hundred adventurers had gathered.

They talked amongst themselves, as they waited nervously.

I was distanced from the tables, watching over them from the wall. This time, I wasn't an attendee, but the host.

Monica was busily moving around, and she put the temple virgins in maid clothes to have them help out.

When she came up next to me, Monica…

"As I thought, perhaps keeping them in their temple robes would've been better? I was sure it would look out of place, but by doing this, I've killed their character traits."

"What are you even talking about? More importantly, do you think we have enough food and drink?"

When I confirmed it, she nodded.

"We've made no oversights. But there is a bit of a problem."

"Yeah, I understand that one. We'll be able to hold out until the end of this battle, right?"

"Yes."

I understood the problem we carried. After Monica checked in with me, she went back to work.

I looked at the hall. Creit-san was there, and he was wearing conspicuously high-spirited clothing.

(I'm not deceiving him, but I'm certainly using him. It isn't a good feeling.)

Dreaming adventurers.

Rather than using it to get rich quick, those that wanted to escape from this lifestyle.

Right, the ones I gathered were those aiming for government service. I had Creit-san gather those aiming for knighthood as well.

(Birds of a feather flock together, I see.)

Among them were adventurers formerly of knight households. Just as Aria hailed from a militaristic Viscount House, there were a number of adventurers with similar heritage.

In order to reclaim their former glory, they had resolved themselves to hop aboard this time's mission.

From the Jewel, came the slightly-fed-up voice of the Fifth.

『No matter the time period, you'll find folks who can't calculate loss and gain. Well, the fact they're at least resolved is decent.』

The Sixth as well.

『Exactly. But they'll be reliable for now. And thinking of the future, the Holy Maiden will need those who'll move as her arms and legs.』

I turned my eyes to the stairs.

(It's time.)

With some drink in their systems, and some time to alleviate the tension, we had prepared the stage for the others to make their appearance.

The consecrated virgins… not in maid clothes, but in the outfits that Monica had sewn, they came out, and talk broke out among the people in the hall.

And when the VIPs came out, it all went silent.

(Yep, she's definitely a Holy Maiden as long as she keeps her mouth shut.)

In a white dress that seemed to be stuck-fast to her skin, down came Aura-san. Behind her followed the former Holy Maiden Thelma-san, and former High Priest Gastone-san.

When I sent a look to Eva, she nodded her head.

Eva had a Skill of her own. It wasn't too useful in battle, and the girl herself didn't really seem to like it.

Its name was【Voice】… it amplified the sound of her voice, and let a larger number of people hear it.

And this time's centerpiece was her stage【Back Music】. Even without instruments, she could put on performances with her Skill.

Majestic music began to stream into the assembly hall. Eva didn't show any signs of having done anything, and I couldn't help but wonder where exactly the music was coming from.

(It's rare for there to be a Skill hated by its holder. No, did it manifest precisely because she didn't desire it? There are quite a few mysteries with Skills.)

There was a reason Eva didn't make use of her Skill. She hated it.

She wanted her voice to reach on its own. She didn't want to rely on a Skill.

Music was to be made of instruments, and playing them together before a crowd was the whole point. So her Skill was nothing but irksome.

Or so she said.

This time, we didn't have the leisure or time to hire an orchestra, so I left it to her.

The atmosphere and sound, as well as the real Holy Maiden's… no, the former Holy Maiden candidate's appearance set the hall in silence and anticipation.

Aura-san stopped part-way down the stairs, and looked over the hall before speaking.

“I thank you all for gathering. I, Aura, am grateful to be in your presence today.”

Unmotivated, and violent… from my image of her, the girl’s current bearing was too different, I felt like I was going to laugh.

I held back and listened, but the contents were, to put it simply… let’s go forth and beat Zayin’s Divine Knights black and blue together. Because if you succeed, you’ll get government offices, and I’ll take you on as knights.

Is how it was.

Right, that was the bait for this time’s gathering. We couldn’t pay a reward. But it goes without saying we had to prepare the necessary food supplies on our side.

And Aura-san sent a glance to me.

“In order to take back Zayin, here, a new knight brigade will be formed. Its lead shall be left to the one who saved my life, Lyle-dono.”

I took a step forward, and the eyes of the gathered adventurers gathered on me.

“It will only be temporary, but I shall graciously take up the position of commander.”

And Aura-san…

“I would like to leave the role of vice commander to Creit Benini-dono.”

Creit-san was so moved, he broke into tears.

“… Y-yes!”

His voice as he answered was shaking a bit.

After spreading out her arms, Aura-san crossed her hands over her small chest, and made a pose of prayer.

“Here, a knight brigade… a【Holy Knight Brigade】has been formed.

Brave ones, may you sally forth with the protection of the Goddess.”

To oppose the divine knight brigade, we had formed a holy knight brigade. By the way, the naming was done on the spot.

They were barely any different.

(Well, even if it doesn’t quite roll off the tongue, it’s that… the Holy Maiden’s knight brigade, or how to put it… that does sound like something that country would have. It’s a temporary name, and anyone can come along and change it later.)

It was a simple thought, but perhaps it would work out fine? And like that, the Holy Maiden’s knight brigade was dubbed the holy knight brigade.

The hall heated up again, and I got the feeling I was the only one mulling over the name so much. Now to take the next move…

(I’ll have to meet Albano-san’s party tomorrow.)

❼

The next day, I took Miranda, and found Albano-san in a bar.

It was a store that’s sole entrance was an alleyway, and not the best place to be. But the quality of the dishes they put out was high, and the taste was delicious.

Taking a swig of ale, Albano-san looked at us.

“Assist on Zayin’s side? Don’t want to. I only ride winning horses.”

When he said that quite boldly, I gave a bitter smile, and nodded.

“That’s alright. But it’s not like swinging a weapon is all that makes a war, right?”

Around us, rough folk drank ale, and made merry.

Harlots called out to the customers in the bar, but they didn’t come closer to us, as Miranda was at the table.

Albano-san looked at us with his cup still held against his face.

Miranda extended a hand towards her food.

“What we want to leave to you is spreading rumors in Zayin. That the former Holy Maiden candidate has stood up, and that she will wage war on Zayin.”

Albano-san thought over it. Rather than hesitating, it looked as if he didn’t understand.

“… I do know you lot are making some flashy moves. Making use of Creit’s rock-headedness, and spreading rumors on your own?”

I nodded.

“It’s to win. We’ve no intentions of losing. Of course, I’ve not a preference for losing battles.”

It’s a family tradition. We won’t fight losing battles. Only the Third threw down his life to buy time, but that was because it was a necessity.

It wasn’t for his own loss, he lost his life for a greater victory.

Albano-san laughed.

“Nice! I like guys like you. But what will you do by spreading rumors? If that’s all there is to it, I will admit there’s no demerit to us, though.”

He seemed to think it may be a trap.

“Yes, spreading rumors is all we need. After that, it’ll embellish itself on its own. And there are a number of rumors I’d like you to leak. Please spread them in order. Ah, I’ll put up the funds for your food and drink while in Zayin. Once you’re done spreading them, you need only return.”

Neither me nor Miranda expected him to do the job properly. But rather than having him carry it out, we wanted the fact to remain that we had made the request to him.

When we were making so many showy moves, we believed there were those watching us.

“… Hmm, well if that’s all, then why not. But I’ve a request of my own.”

“What could it be?”

When I said that, Albano-san made a serious expression.

“Let me in on this matter.”

Miranda was a little wary as she uncrossed her legs under the table so she could move at a moment’s notice.

And smiling, she…

“What could you mean by that? You want to join in? I can’t see you working well alongside Creit-san, you know?”

Albano-san put his hands up on the backrest of his chair, and turned his body diagonally towards us.

“What, I don’t care about that knight brigade. I just want to get out of this lowly lifestyle of mine. No, make that we. We’re a hopeless gathering of trash. But look here… we don’t have to be at the top, but we have our longings for a respectable life. When that chance is rolling around in front of us, isn’t grasping at it the human thing to do?”

I breathed out a sigh.

“So what exactly do you want?”

“I’ll take up the request. While I’m at it, how about you tell me what you’ll be doing over there?”

The Third let his voice from the Jewel.

『Well, we’re only doing this to show our enemies that we’re making a move. I don’t think there’ll be a problem if he betrays, but…』

I looked at the responses on the Search Skill. Albano-san was giving off a blue signal. And there was also a red party in the bar.

When I sent a wary glance their way, Miranda saw, and noticed as well.

Albano-san spoke.

“You’ll find adventurers here on one side or the other. Those guys are on Zayin’s side. They may go out to sell info on us. My party will take on those sorts for you. You guys don’t look too skilled in that field.”

We weren’t the best at it, I concede.

“… And what reward do you want?”

“Money, status, fame… I’d like to say all of them, but let’s just say I want something considerable. Even if it isn’t a Zayin governmental position, something like a medal others will recognize. Former bandits… as long as I can get rid of that label.”

With an earnest face, I nodded.

And…

“Come to think of it, Albano-san?”

“What?”

“Zayin’s knight brigade… do you happen to know of their elite force?”

“Those guys that do the dirty work? Yeah, I know them; what of it? From my point of view, I can only be envious. They do the dirty work, and people call them the god damn elites.”

“Would you be interested in that elite force?”

Albano-san made a face as if he couldn’t comprehend my words.

Miranda inferred what I was thinking. She put her hand to her chin, looked at Albano-san, and nodded a number of times.

“Well, maybe it’s just right. Oil and water.”

And said that.

I spent my time carrying out such preparations, and in two weeks' time, Alette-san came over to the manor.

What she brought with her was a letter.

I accepted it in the parlor, and looked at her face.

"I'm looking forward to our meeting with the crown princess."

When I said that with a smile, Alette-san made a dubious expression.

"You already brazenly investigated it beforehand… that's quite a nice personality you have there, Lyle-kun."

"I graciously accept your words of praise."

She likely didn't want it to come to this. But with those three cards in my hand when the meeting was proposed, I thought I'd surely be able to meet the princess.

Even if I myself wasn't of such high position.

Alette-san looked at my face.

"… I'll just say this beforehand, but if you won't come under Lorphys' umbrella, we can't back your cause. Even if we can cooperate."

Funds, goods, manpower… I knew Lorphys didn't have the leisure to send such things around.

That's why I didn't depend on them.

"I don't mind. All I desire is that things may go well for both of us. I do think you will profit from it as well."

There, Alette-san addressed me.

"This is… I'm not certain, but I think you should deliver it to the former Holy Maiden candidate Aura-dono. It seems there's been a movement."

Seeing her mutter that in irritation, I nodded.

"Right, that fiancé prince did take up a stay, did he? Quite a

troublesome thing when war is approaching.”

While she made it clear she shared my opinion, Alette-san didn’t say anything to that effect.

“I don’t think the results will come out how you think they will, Lyle-kun.”

I smiled, and heard a voice from the Jewel.

It was the Seventh’s voice.

『Results? That’s something you take for yourself. And our preparations are already onto the next stage. There’s no stopping it anymore.』

The Fourth as well.

『If we stop here, it’ll be a large blow… hah.』

I ignored his depression, and spoke to Alette-san.

“We’ll try to do something about it.”

“That so? Even so, that maid of yours isn’t here today, I see.”

When I saw her look around the room, I smiled, and nodded.

❼

… It was a fortress on the outskirts of Zayin.

It had once been put to use, but now the knights dispatched to it had little to do. Its soldiers were just hired from the surrounding villages.

It had been constructed to mark the border with Lorphys border, but that line had been pushed back, and the fortress had lost its role.

Even so, it had close to fifty stationed, and it was maintained for the sake of it. The reason its expanse was unproportional to the few people gathered was due to its lack of strategic value.

The soldier on duty sighed atop the fortress’s wall. A soldier from

the same village walked over.

“What’s that? Were you gambling late into the night or something?”

The yawning man spoke in contempt.

“What else is there to do? Even if they give us money, there’s nowhere to use it in this bloody fort. The knights have no motivation. Even if we train, there’s no meaning to it. This fort should just be demolished already.”

There wasn’t any helping the young soldier saying such a thing.

In the meaningless【Fort Noinyl】, the demoted knights didn’t seem to care, and the place reeked of alcohol from morning to dusk.

The subordinate soldiers’ morale was endlessly low.

“Hah, even when there’s a war with Lorphys… it sure is peaceful here.”

Looking into the distance, the soldier murmured.

“Huh? Is that a horse in the sky… oy! Isn’t that a quilin!?”

“You screwing with me!? Where!? … It’s really flying. Without wings.”

The soldiers were excited over such a rare sight. And the others stationed in the fort were the same. Without any stories to speak of, the boring fortress was soon roused by the sighting of the quilin.

It didn’t take much time at all for the hungover knights to stumble outside, and see the quilin spanning the sky.

“Quilins are supposed to bring good luck, right? Then something good will happen to us as well…”

But a single one of them rose their voice.

“E-enemy attack! It’s an enemy attack!!”

The bell was promptly sounded, and the knights and soldiers knew what that meant, but no one took up a weapon as they looked

outside the fortress walls in surprise.

Outside, was what looked like a large iron-made box with a cylinder furnished on its side. Even without a horse, it was steadily moving.

“W-what the hell is that! Why did you lot let it get so close!?”

The hungover knight opened his eyes, and grasped the lapel of the soldier. But the knight himself was in trousers and a shirt… he didn’t have a weapon on hand.

“T-the quilin caught my attention.”

There, one of the soldiers shouted out.

“Oy, look!”

“That can’t be…”

On top of the metallic box was a girl in a white dress. A cloth rendered her face invisible. Her wavy brown hair was clear enough, though.

“The Holy Maiden?”

The fortress’ soldiers had never seen the real Holy Maiden before. They had only ever seen the previous Holy Maiden Thelma a handful of times.

The knights determined that was wrong. Her outfit was different, but she had a certain air to her.

In that case… he recalled a rumor.

A single knight spoke.

“… So it’s Aura-sama!”

Having escaped from Zayin, she hand rose to action in Beim, and was gathering soldiers, or so the rumors went. But the knights hadn’t anticipated she wold come to such a remote regions.

“Why is she in such a desolate…”

A soldier asked.

“What should we do!? Is it alright if we shoot some arrows!?”

Before any orders could be issued to the soldiers, the iron box carrying the Holy Maiden had come all the way to the gate. And the large cylinder turned towards the center of the gate.

“What are your intentions. Dammit! Get your weapons at the ready! That is a fake! There’s no way she’d…”

After the knight had said that much, a violent explosive sound rocked the fort. A number of soldiers collapsed on the spot, and smoke was coming out of the area around the gate.

The knight immediately looked towards it, to see close to a hundred men stream into the fortress walls. With those fully-armed soldiers streaming in, the knight quickly remembered he was unarmed, and retreated further in

There, with her shoulders, stomach, and thighs exposed, and with separate cloths lazily covering her arms, chest, and waist, a young girl descended from the sky.

“W-who are you!”

The knight put his hand to his waist, but he had left his sword behind. To the giggling girl, the knight snatched a spear off a nearby soldier, and let out a thrust.

As the girl dodged it, she continued into a spinning kick, and kicked the man off of his feet.

The kicked knight rolled along the ground, before colliding with the wall, and losing consciousness.

“S-strong.”

When another knight said that, the intruders ran up the steps, surrounding the ones atop the wall.

Determining they were beaten in numbers and equipment, the knight.

“… We surrender.”

He surrendered. If it was really the force of the one calling herself

the rightful Holy Maiden, Aura, he calculated that nothing terrible would happen to them.

The young girl spoke.

“Hurry and tie them up. Aura-sama is coming. And send out troops to secure edible supplies from the area. Gather up soldiers as well. It’s our victory if we can finish preparing before the enemy comes.”

Hearing that, the knight was sure about it.

(Dammit, for us to lose without fighting…)

So the knight was bound, but he noticed the one binding him wasn’t the most skillful. His men relieved of their weapons, the soldiers were being bound one after the next. The knights began to move. As he was being transported down the stairs, a voice called out to the enemy soldier who’d bound him.

“Oy, help out over here.”

“No, I have to move this one to the dungeon…”

To the troubled enemy soldier, the knight.

“I’ve surrendered. I shant run. And you’ve bound me so I can’t run to begin with.”

There, the enemy soldier pretended to hesitate, before going back up the stairs.

The knight grinned, as he descended with his bindings still on, and proceeded to undo the ropes.

“Amateurs. It looks like she scraped together some adventurers, but she could only get a hundred at that. They’re not even sufficient in supplies.”

He hid so as not to be found, as he proceeded through the fortress, heading for where he’d tethered his horse.

And after straddling the saddle, he set it running towards the destroyed remains of the gate.

The enemy cried out something towards him, but the knight ignored it.

(If I bring this info back with me, I'll be saved. Let's say we confronted the enemy, put up a good fight, but were breached. And that I did my best to convey the message…)

Aiming for Zayin's capital, the knight galloped on…

13 - Royal Princess

Lorphys' royal castle had a sturdy make.

The town around it was organized for efficiency. If you want to put it another way, it gave off quite a simple impression.

And within that simple castle, the audience hall alone was extravagant. It's just, it looked to be that a number of ornaments were forcibly adorned.

The red carpet spread out, and at the room's highest point sat the princess in a large chair. Beside her sat her engagement partner, the prince of Selva.

Princess【Annerinne Lorphys】had her hair in a half up. But her long hair was her pride. It was tied at the end, and when she sat, she would drape it over her shoulder.

Her violet hair began to turn pale around a third from the tip.

A white dress, and perhaps for the sole purpose of resting her hair on, a red mantle was hung around her shoulders.

Her skin was pale, and had a kind-looking expression. Her slightly-drooping eyes contained green pupils.

But her face looked a little troubled.

She took some fleeting glances at the reactions of her fiancé beside her… 【Dario Selva】. Perhaps her smiling fiancé wasn't quite amused, as his smile was stiff.

His white hair, and comfortable white clothing made his tan skin look overly prominent. His red eyes were looking at us.

Beside the royal princess… a few steps down, sitting in the closest position to the couple, Prime Minister【Lonbolt】cleared his throat, and proceeded the conversation.

"Well then, your request is to be left independent. Is that correct?"

Former High Priest Gastone-san denied it. The heads of both men looked oh-so lonely, so perhaps a sort of sympathy had been built. Lonbolt-san's tone of voice was a kind one.

(Lonbolt-san looks like he has his troubles.)

While he didn't have hair on his head, his eyes were sharp. His body was slim enough to make people watching him feel worried. That was Lonbolt-san.

"No. Not our own independence, we wish to retake our country. The reason we have opened this meeting in Lorphys is only to proclaim we will not be launching any attacks on your side."

Around were nobles and knights, enough to make the audience hall feel narrow.

From the Jewel, I heard a rude voice.

It was the Seventh.

『… It's shabbier than my mansion.』

The Third spoke.

『Well, even when compared to what the Fourth had at his time, they have less land. There's no helping it.』

Confirming the faces around, the Fifth.

『They're too small in scale, and they can't gather troops… if they don't have the numbers, they have to raise the quality. I see, they do seem to be putting some effort into it, but… why does only this room feel so strange? The others are nice and simple.』

The Fourth spoke.

『It's kinda in bad taste. Even from my point of view, it's in bad taste.』

The Sixth seemed to be looking at Dario.

『… Could it be that prince called Dario's preferences? Around his arms and neck, he does have an excessive amount of ornaments.

Even when he doesn't seem to be an upstart or anything.』

Selva was a country with a considerable amount of history. They weren't new upstarts, but I couldn't say they had particularly good taste either.

(Is that their national character? In that case, it's been arranged to match Selva.)

Lonbolt-san addressed Gastone-san.

"I see; so you're aiming to retake. And for that sake, you seek our assistance."

The one to speak out there was Thelma-san.

"No, we will move of our own accord. Let's see. After reclamation, there will surely be times we'll seek out your assistance."

Aura-san stayed quiet. Both she and Thelma-san were wearing the dresses Monica had prepared, and the eyes of the surrounding men gathered on them.

Dario whispered something quietly to princess Annerinne.

After observing that action, I looked around. I didn't let slide that Alette-san and the other knights were making some unpleasant faces.

And royal princess Annerinne opened her mouth.

"But I'm sure moving individually will prove difficult. What say you to taking up a stay in Lorphys? I think there's a share of things we can do for your cause."

Thelma-san spoke.

"No, the sentiment alone is enough. While Zayin is bringing so much trouble to Lorphys, we know full well how much we'll be afforded."

What we wished for here was an agreement not to lay hands on one another. And my personal goal was to see the princess.

Beside me, Novem was expressionlessly looking at the princess.

Now wasn't the time to smile, but she was making quite a serious face… rather than that, it felt as if she were ascertaining something.

On my other side stood Miranda.

Miranda was sending her eyes at Dario.

Princess Annerinne was…

"If you come under our side, I'm sure negotiations will become possible. We've finished preparations to hand over our mithril. Won't you lend us your strength in evading this war?"

In regards to that persuasion, Thelma-san.

"I appreciate the proposal. But this war has already passed the point of evasion. Armies of both sides are already gathering on the border. It seems small fights have already broken out. And Zayin won't back down until the result they seek is before their eyes."

Zayin didn't want mithril from the start. What they wanted was a pretext to attack. It's only that mithril had come out at around the right time.

When Thelma-san was about to persuade Princess Annerinne back, her fiancé Dario made a move. He stood, and clapped his hands.

After all eyes gathered on him, he opened his mouth.

"No, this is truly wonderful. A Holy Maiden making a stand for her homeland… no, former Holy Maiden, was it? I do find it beautiful. But instead of looking only at yourselves, I wish for you to look at Lorphys' current state of affairs. Not to be mean, but you are the ones who have caused its current strife. Isn't it only reasonable that you lend your assistance?"

It was a sound opinion, but I knew.

Selva was moving in the backstage, and they were steadily making preparations.

Putting together the information gathered by information dealer Rauno-san, and the conclusion he reached… hearing his hypothesis,

there were a few places I could nod to.

(Selva is in a hurry.)

The reason for their hurry was that they neighbored the two maidens of the great war… the country shared a border with both of those women of war.

To oppose them, national power was a necessity, and they also needed cooperation with other countries. Rauno-san hypothesized that it wasn't Lorphys, but Zayin that was aiding them.

(Well, I can't really say where their real objective lies, but whether it be whittling down, or snatching, there's no doubt that a tasty outcome awaits for Zayin and Selva.)

And this time, Lorphys' position was that of the prey.

Aura-san opened her mouth. She seemed to have had enough of the atmosphere here.

"… We are saying we will resolve the problem on our own. And our proposal is just as you've heard. Wouldn't that be most beneficial to your side?"

Our proposal.

It was a rise to action in the parts of Zayin's territory that had once belonged to Lorphys. So far, we had captured a declining fortress, and we were going to direct ourselves as an independent power from there.

It was a pain, so I didn't really want to do it, but if we weren't going to stick onto Lorphys' side, there was no choice but to choose a route like that.

I mean, the current Lorphys was close to moving by every word of fiancé Dario. It was moving to Selva's will even more blatantly.

(If we went and joined this side, we'll either be confined to the reserves, of assassinated… what a pain.)

One of the lined up nobles raised their voice.

“Your highness. If they make a stand in the remote regions, Zayin will have no choice but to direct some of their troops there. Meaning it will cut down their deployment on the front lines. Wouldn’t it be best to accept this talk?”

The other nobles as well.

“Right now, chipping away at the enemy forces is vital. From Zayin’s perspective, there’s no way they could overlook the stand of these former Holy Maidens. More so, I think it fine if we offer them a bit of backing ourselves. Goods, as well as soldiers and funds. The more they have, the better for us.”

He said to support us, but he was seeing us as a diversion for the enemy. The right decision if he wanted to protect his homeland.

There, Princess Annerinne.

“Even before war has begun, you already think of fighting… it is the government’s role to search for ways to avert it no matter what.”

(She’s got a point there. But the mistake she’s making is…)

The Sixth put my thoughts to words.

『… Naïve. It isn’t before war has begun. It’s long since started. Perhaps this girl would’ve become a fine queen if she didn’t put out her mouth in times of peace.』

The Third too.

『Her appearance is nice; just right for a decoration. Well, the problem is how she’s blind to love, perhaps?』

Right, perhaps she had fallen for Selva’s prince, but she was at his every whim.

The horrible part of it was how she took Dario’s words over her own vassals. Various internal problems had broken out, and Lorphys’ domestic affairs were a mess.

(She’ll immediately change her stance on her fiancé’s input, so we can’t really trust her.)

The reason the ancestors proclaimed Princess Annerinne as terrible, was because we had found such information. Her words held no credibility. That's why we couldn't trust them.

There were too many insecure factors to be had with her as our ally. So we took some distance.

Alette-san offered her opinion to princess Annerinne.

"Your highness, it wouldn't be strange if Zayin moved at any moment now. Averting it is already impossible. I beg of you, for the sake of both causes, use this meeting to…

And once again, an opinion was cut off.

Dario pointed at me.

"You were permitted to stand in this hall because you were to be the next vice-captain of the knights, but it seems you were not of such caliber. Negotiations are to be had until we can attain the greatest possible outcome for the people. And do you have knotholes for eyes? A mere adventurer… what's more, a nameless adventurer, and part-time knight captain? Do you seriously believe one who has never commanded soldiers can bring down a fortress? Then let us say it as we stand… you are incompetent."

Hearing those words, the Third shook with laughter.

『T-truly. Lyle… hasn't experienced a real war yet. That one isn't a mistake.』

I was of the same opinion.

And I saw the knights and nobles in the audience hall holding back their anger. Even so, Dario continued to speak.

"From what I've heard, you've gathered no more than a hundred adventurers. Will you even reach that fortress of yours?"

Alette-san followed through tor me.

"… Even in Beim, Lyle-dono is an excellent adventurer. I shall guarantee it. I believe he has outstanding future prospects."

Dario snorted.

“How far off the mark can you be? This is why Lorphys’ knight brigade is no good. Knights pretending to be adventurers, and laboring themselves over…”

To Dario’s side, Princess Annerinne spoke.

“I deeply apologize, Dario-sama. But Alette made that statement with the country’s well-being on her mind. Please permit it.”

The Fourth.

『Well, she’s young. Around the same as Lyle? Love errs her judgement. It’s a fatal flaw at this point in time, mind you.』

Within the hall, the surrounding nobles and knights began to realize where they stood with Dario. We were being completely left behind.

I held back on giving a bitter smile, and sought permission for my next statement.

“Beg pardon. Is it alright if I have a say?”

When it quieted down, Lonbolt-san looked at me, and permitted it.

“… We are the ones who should be apologizing. Please go ahead.”

Not to Dario, I spoke whilst looking at Princess Annerinne.

“Well then, as long as we’re able to get a fortress in our hands, would the problem cease to be?”

Perhaps irritated at being ignored, Dario stuck his mouth in from the side.

“You’ll take one down? One ignorant of war sure knowns how to flap his mouth.”

Dario was in his mid-twenties. But as far as I’d researched, there were no records of him stepping onto a battlefield. I looked at Princess Annerinne, and tried again.

“Well then, about the fortress… If we get out hands on Fort Noinyl,

will all problems between us be resolved?”

Well it really wouldn’t resolve anything.

But still irritated, thinking we couldn’t do it, Dario spoke.

“Just try it. Lose and come back if you will, but please make sure you don’t get that Holy Maiden of yours stolen while you’re at it!”

The Fifth let out his voice.

『It’s because it’s more convenient for him if we’re out of the picture. More so, maybe it’s best for him if we were crushed and disappeared altogether.』

And the princess as well.

“Yes. If you can accomplish it, we will feel more secure with leaving the Holy Maiden in your hands.”

Internally.

(Already treating her as the Holy Maiden. What’s more, acting as if they’re of higher position? It’s not like we’re relying on them… but it’s convenient to say the least.)

When I bowed, I felt a reaction from my Skills.

There was a presence hurriedly approaching the audience chamber.

The Third called over to me. I felt some mischief in his voice.

『Lyle, how about you…』

Hearing him, I mused over how embarrassing it’d be if I failed, as I made a grand gesture.

“Very well. Then I, Lyle Walt, shall take control of a fortress. What, it’s a simple matter. Let’s see… yes, and that’s the end of it.”

When I snapped my fingers, some ridiculing eyes fell on me. Princess Annerinne was taken aback. Looking at me, Dario.

“Have you lost it?”

Said that, with an indecent smile on his face. Novem beside me opened her mouth.

“Lyle-sama, you’re joking too much.”

And Miranda as well.

“It would be better if he was always like that.”

They were both mildly amazed. But neither of them looked down on me.

And the hall’s door burst open with some momentum.

The one who opened it was a knight who looked to be a messenger. Perhaps he had rushed here, as he was out of breath. After taking a single deep breath, he spoke.

“M-message in! Fort Noinyl has been…”

The surrounding reactions were quite interesting. Eyes opened wide, quite a few were looking between my face, and the messenger’s.

Inside my head, I…

(Thank god I was right… I was saved the embarrassment.)

I was overcome with relief.

“… Fort Noinyl has been taken by a group calling themselves the Holy Knights!”

Within the ensuing uproar, I spoke to the princess.

“Glad to have resolved our matter. We will be heading to the fortress. Don’t worry, we’ll draw the enemy away for you. It should prove at least mildly to Lorphys’ advantage. Ah, and we don’t need any reinforcements. I’m sure you have it rough as it is. This chance we’ve created for you… please put it to good use.”

When I gathered up all our members to leave the chamber, a voice called out to me from behind. It was Dario.

“W-wait! Do you understand what it is you’ve just done!? With this,

Lorphys and Zayin have lost all chances of avoiding this war! This is all your responsibility!”

From the Jewel, I heard the voice of a Third enjoying himself.

『Lyle’s fault? Ahahaha! No, no… this is your problem with Zayin, and you just happened to make it a tad easier to take a stand, so he did it. And he gave you prior notice, so doesn’t that make him the upright one? How cruel. Even with prior notice.』

(Prior notice, is it? Well, I did tell him before the information got here, but how ill-natured.)

The Third seemed to be having fun, knowing it would come to this. He really was a schemer.

I knew I had prepared enough forces to take it down. But I never thought the messenger would come in at that very moment.

I turned, and gave my response.

“Oh, you’re putting the blame on me? But how troubling… you see, I have no right or obligation to Lorphys. I question whether there’s a need for me to take responsibility. Well then, it will be getting busy from here on, so I shall be taking my leave.”

As I left the hall, I saw Alette-san stick up her thumb in a position that Dario couldn’t see.

She was considerably delighted.

But it really would be getting busy.

“Now then, on to the next move.”

I hurriedly moved onto the next move.

14 - The Other Side

… Inside Fort Noinyl.

A single room surrounded by walls of stone, was fitted with adequate furniture. Light streamed into it from a small window.
Inside that room, Shannon cast off the white costume she'd been wearing, and threw it down on the bed.

"That damn brute! He used me as bait! I'm definitely going to smack him!"

It was the outfit Monica had made for the Holy Maiden. Besides her, Clara was reading in a corner of the room.

"Yes, he definitely used you as bait. But that's because you were the most suitable body double we had among us. And this time was quite a helpful venture. May-san keeping watch from the sky, and Shannon-san using her eyes to inspect the path… Lyle-san's amazing to be able to do all that by himself."

It wasn't just Shannon and Clara who had come as a separate detachment to command the main body of the Holy Knights. Aria and Eva, and Clara and Monica. Most of the party had been sent towards the fortress.

The 'Pile Bunker' furnished on Porter was a disposable siege weapon that Monica had made.

It had taken down the gate, but had broken down after one use. She had made two in total, so only one of them remained. According to Monica, 'It's a defective product… but it has romance,' apparently.

At present, Monica was working on Porter's maintenance, and preparing meals, while the Holy Knights had went into preparations for the next task.

Aria and Eva were on lookout, and May had headed off to Lorphys. If everything went according to plan, she would pick up Lyle's group,

and return.

And while that was going on, Shannon was flailing about. Clara was Shannon's guard, and safe-keeper.

"If you go outside, they'll know you're a fake at once, so stay holed up in your room? That bastard definitely has it coming to him!"

Clara sighed.

"I do admit it was harsh. But because of that, it looks like things will work out. The close to forty soldiers of the fort have offered their assistance. What surprised me most was the knights. We purposely made it so they could escape, yet only one of them tried it."

Shannon was once an Imperial Noble daughter. She was a bit knowledgeable in that field.

"He was shipped off to this remote land, so he's probably a knight without promotion prospects, isn't he? He's going to bet on us to try and get a promotion. Or perhaps try and betray?"

Having taken in the soldiers, the scale had risen to around a hundred and fifty troops.

But that was still insufficient.

Clara pushed up her glasses with her fingertip to reset their position.

"Now is the real deal. Well then, I do hope Lyle-san's group will be able to get here safely."

Shannon spoke.

"Onee-sama's with him, so there's nothing to worry about. Isn't it right about time they got back? Look, there they are. Quilins sure are convenient. They can fly through the sky, after all."

When Shannon looked outside, Clara went to the room's window to take a look. A small dot in the sky gradually grew bigger, and it took her some time to realize that point was a quilin…

… The ones to arrive at Fort Noinyl were Aura and Thelma.

Aura jumped off the quilin… May's back, and felt a sense of joy as her feet planted themselves in firm soil.

A robe was draped over her dress, and she looked quite cold.

"… I'm never flying through the sky again."

Aura said that with a pale expression, and perhaps Thelma was the same, as she was pressing her hand to her face. Her complexion wasn't the best, and both of them had been through quite a bit.

May reverted to human form, and addressed the two of them.

"… We were only late because you two were so rowdy. Calm down, why don't you?"

Even May was tired. She sat down on a wooden crate of the fortress. Aria ran over in full armor, and called out to the three of them.

"Where's Lyle and the others?"

May shook her head to the side.

"Elsewhere. He said for those two to go ahead and persuade the troops. Also, Gaston-san and Novem will be coming next. Without Novem here, he's quite anxious, it seems."

Hearing that, Aria.

"I thought Lyle would be coming first."

Seeing some anxiety from Aria, May recalled her message.

What Lyle had told her.

"Come to think of it, Lyle said to let you give orders for a while. Said it would be a good experience."

Hearing that, Aria looked a little happy at first, but her expression soon turned tense.

"… Understood. I'm to learn to do a proper job, am I?"

Hearing that, May.

“If that’s what you think, then it must be so? Ah, I’m looking forward to a meal. And I’ll be resting a while. I’ll have to go back over there again soon.”

Looking at May lay herself over the wooden crate, Aria was mildly fed-up as she turned to Aura and Thelma.

“Good work. I’ll guide you to your rooms at once.

Hearing that, Aura looked over the fortress interior.

“… So you really took it down.””

She muttered it as if she still couldn’t believe it. Thelma was the same, but her complexion was slowly returning.

“After coming this far, there’s no option but to believe it. Aura, for now, just do what you can. Rest a little, and give an address to the soldiers.”

Aria explained the fort’s situation to Thelma.

“Um, at present, the soldiers are being cooperative. Without any persuasion, they’ve opted to join our side.”

There, Thelma nodded, but…

“Even so, it is necessary. And please put a guard on Aura. I’m sure there are those without the best of intentions.”

Aria nodded, left May behind, and guided the two through the inside of the fort…

❼

In the inn we booked at Lorphys, me, Novem, and Miranda were standing against the wall.

The room wasn’t vast, but it wasn’t narrow either.

We moved around and rented based on need, and occasionally, we

would rack up needless expenses by renting two separate inns.

In front, Gastone-san and Lonbolt-san were talking.

It was an exchange of countries I couldn't really understand.

"Return that point? But to us…"

"I understand. But we must recover our national power no matter what, or else the future looks…"

The reason they were talking about future plans was because it would prove necessary once Zayin was taken back.

I looked over their secret talks, and gripped the Jewel.

The one to let out his voice was the Sixth.

『What, can't calm down? There's nothing you can do here, Lyle. Even if you say something here, you don't know enough about the state of affairs, and you'll only trouble those two.』

The Third called out.

『There's long-term circumstance, and circumstance you can never understand unless you live there, so you can only watch over them until they reach an agreement they can be satisfied with.』

The Third intended to leave the national problems to the two of them.

And the two of them had already gone into things far removed from taking back Zayin.

Lonbolt-san wiped his forehead and top off with a handkerchief. I could tell that both participants were quite passionate about it.

Gastone-san also wiped his brow off, and offered a handshake.

Lonbolt-san smiled.

"Very well, we shall proceed matters as such once Zayin is recovered."

Gastone-san spoke.

“Let us both bring forth a favorable result.”

They each smiled as they gave wishes towards the safety of each other, but Lonbolt-san’s expression when he left the room was the epitome of severity.

(Even if we fail in taking Zayin, he’ll move so that the damage he suffers is kept to a minimum.)

What was decided upon in their talks was the assistance they’d give after the country was under one flag. I was also involved, but I left this matter to Gastone-san.

Looking outside, I saw that it was beginning to get dark.

Gastone-san turned to us, and explained the situation.

“… Lorphys is unable to provide assistance in the recapture. And after its success, he even asked to borrow some of our troops. If we accept that deal, we’ll somewhat be able to maintain Zayin’s national power.”

I nodded.

“Understood. After reclamation, I will personally make a move. I’ll move by Lorphys’ words.”

“Thank you very much. And… I deeply apologize. As Zayin is, we’ve no means to reimburse you for your troubles. Even after receiving so much aid, the present state is one where we cannot put out an adequate reward.”

I smiled.

“No, there is already a huge merit in it for me. I’ll leave that matter to you.”

When I brought it up, Gastone-san nodded.

“Why of course. It’s just as much a merit to us. But is it possible?”

When he inquired towards the possibility, I heard a knocking sound from the window.

It was May.

I sent a look to Miranda. She went over to the window to let her in.

May was making a bit of a tired expression.

“Hah, it really is busy. Lyle, the fort is going smoothly. Those two are going to persuade the soldiers, and go out to the surrounding village to look for applicants, it seems. They think they can get a number of knights, and some of the priests of the more remote regions. And for some reason, there weren’t any movements around. The enemy isn’t attacking.”

After taking in Gastone-san’s slightly surprised expression, I nodded. It seems there was a reason some would choose to ally with us.

To elaborate.

“The ones sent out to the remote regions are mostly those of our faction. But there are also those plotting unsavory actions. For there to be no enemy movement… I apologize, I have considerable knowledge about the country’s military affairs, but I don’t know the reason.”

I touched my hand to my chin, and thought.

(There are other areas with troops stationed nearby the fortress, right? Did something happen? And wait, do we have a lot of allies… should I go there personally to discern friend and foe?)

When I felt the impulse to move myself, the Fifth’s voice came from the Jewel.

『… Lyle, leave this to the ones you’ve dispatched. You’ve prepared this much. If they’re to fail with all that backing them, then that’s all there is to them. How about you believe in them a little? The ones around you are all amazing, I tell you.』

Hearing his opinion, I felt it wasn’t suited to the man, and felt like laughing. I endured it, and directed my eyes towards Gastone-san and Novem.

“As planned, we will send Gastone-san and Novem first. Miranda

and I will remain.”

Novem hesitated for just a moment.

“Lyle-sama, isn’t that dangerous? I believe that having you return first here would be…”

I smiled at her.

“It’s alright. They’ll do fine on their own. And even if I remain here, I have Miranda with me.”

Miranda shrugged her shoulders, and looked a little happy.

“If you say it like that, I’ve no way to decline. Worry not, I’ll protect Lyle.”

I thought as I nodded.

(She really is reliable. There’s no need to protect me.)

Miranda’s abilities were top class, even within the party. She had a different strength than Aria’s, and she was always quite calm, making for a reliable ally.

I spoke to Novem.

“Go. If the enemy makes a move, they’ll need your power.”

There, Novem nodded. May changed to quilin form in the room, and after going outside, she let the two onto her back before disappearing into the darkening Lorphys sky.

❼

… Night.

Inside the Jewel, I received instruction from the Sixth for the first in a while.

I held a halberd, and was guided in quite a practical lesson.

His tall and muscular build let off a heavy strike, and after parrying it

with my halberd, I used the shaft to try sweeping his feet.

My constitution was different from his, and it was clear as day that I wouldn't be able to win if I learned to swing it around in the same way he did.

He took a leap back, and I stepped in to give pursuit.

There, the Sixth gave a grin.

He spread out his left hand, and thrust it at me.

『Now try dodging this! Fire Canon!』

A large fireball flew at me, so I swiped my left hand to the side

"Ice Wall!"

Clashing with the fire, the wall of ice that manifested was blown off and melted. I went ahead and moved to the side to slice at him.

The Sixth sounded delighted.

『Nice! Always stay calm! Panic drops your chances of success!』

He skillfully turned his halberd to turn my strike aside, and put in a kick. Next, he kicked at the ground to send dirt at my face.

"Are you a one-trick pony!?"

With the Second's Skill… Field, I could understand my surroundings even with my eyes closed. The Sixth let out a thrust, so I went along with his motion, stepped in, and thrust out my own halberd.

There was only a few centimeters between our faces, when I found myself spitting blood out my mouth.

The halberd had gone through my chest.

In exchange, I had managed to lightly graze his side.

With a grin, he withdrew his polearm. I collapsed flat on the ground, and rolled to a face-up position.

I got my disturbed breath in order, and after feeling the pain in my

chest fade away, I tried getting to my feet again.

There, the Sixth lent me his hand.

When I took it and stood, the halberd in his hand disappeared. And he applauded me.

『Nicely done. You pass.』

“That was a passing grade?”

When I looked unsatisfied, he gave a bitter smile, and scratched his head.

『Are you an idiot? Just how long do you think I’ve been swinging that baby around? If you want to win for real, it’ll take several years in the making. But if you can do this much, then I’m relieved.』

Saying that, his smile turned sincere, and he looked at my face.

『Now then… Lyle, I’ll show you something interesting.』

“Something interesting.”

『Well I’m feeling quite refreshed here. So do you want to know why I behave so reserved around the Fifth?』

Hearing that, I tilted my head. Come to think of it, the Sixth of his memories was quite violent and vulgar to his father.

Their relationship wasn’t anything like it was now.

“Come to think of it, I do find it strange.”

『Well, about that. In our history, I’m the most… that… how should I put it… yeah, it was nothing but failures.』

A laughing Sixth showed me his memories.

It was inside the mansion. The surrounding imagery changed from the yard to its interior, and there a single woman sat and shed her tears.

Her clothing was in taters.

『That's my younger sister.』

When he said that, I looked at the woman once more.

Her clothing was something you might find on a village girl, and her hands were beaten up. And her hair was in a horrid state. I could see bruising on the parts of her limbs visible outside of her clothing.

The grayened stopped time gradually regained its color, and began to move.

The Sixth offered me an explanation.

『A sister of a different mother, you see. She was once sent to a hostile feudal lord… a vassal house nonetheless. We pitied her the most.』

Following the Sixth's sorrowful words, a woman different from the Sixth's mother came to weep before her.

When time came up to speed, the woman's mother embraced her daughter tight.

The woman spoke.

『I'm not a slave! I can't take it anymore; that house! I don't want to go back!』

Fiennes nervously looked upon the desperate women.

The Sixth went on.

『A lord of a region we had to hold down no matter what. But of all things, they apposed us, and of the other lords… barons, and counts I believe. Anyways, they were a house that's pledged allegiance wouldn't stop rolling around. And as that happened, the sister was sent in as a bride. Because she was of good lineage, she would birth superior children they worked her quite like a slave, it seems.』

The Sixth made a clenched fist.

(But if they did something like that…)

While I thought that, Fredricks… the Fifth in his active years came

into the room.

15 - Fiennes Walt

It was the Sixth's room of memories.

Having come there to study, I received a passing grade, and was shown the Sixth's memories.

A single woman… the Sixth's younger sister of another mother sobbed as she held onto her own birth mother.

Looking at the Fifth… at Fredricks, she hung her head, and cried even harder.

The Sixth of memories… Fiennes spoke.

『Pops, she just went through hell. Leave her be.』

Fiennes rose to protect his sister, but Fredricks was different. He looked at the sobbing girl, and spoke to his mistress, the woman's mother.

『… We're bringing her back. Make the preparations.』

There, the woman.

『… It's because you married me off to such a place! Treating me like an object… in the end, I'm nothing but a daughter with good blood, after all!』

In regards to that, the mother continued holding the woman raining jeers close, as she took her out of the room.

And perhaps Fiennes couldn't endure it anymore. He grasped Fredricks' lapels.

『So your damn beasts really are more important than your children!? With your daughter being treated that way, you don't even feel irritated, do you!?』

There, Fredricks smiled just a little.

And he punched Fiennes off his feet, and restrained him against the ground. The one who ran into the room was the legal wife, Fiennes' mother.

『Fiennes!』

Seeing a scene of her own son held to the ground, Fiennes' mother panicked. And Fredricks spoke in a quiet voice.

『Right, that how you all should be… you pass.』

Saying that, he released Fiennes, and spoke in a loud voice.

『Prepare the armaments. Send out a runner! Fiennes, you'll also be coming along. No… you should stand at the head.』

Seeing the figure of his father smiling, Fiennes looked surprised.

And with those words, Fredricks left the room, and the vassals gathered infront of it. After he issued out a series of orders, they began moving around in hot haste.

But they seemed somewhat happy.

Fiennes was lifted up by his mother, as he looked at his happy father's figure, and muttered.

『The hell. That unsociable man is…』

There, Fiennes' birth mother spoke.

『He used to be a man who smiled a lot, it seems. He used to be kind. Haven't you ever heard it from your grandmother?』

Fiennes.

『… I'd heard. But it was surely bullshit.』

Saying that, fiennes parted with his mother, and left the room.

Seeing the scene, the Sixth put his hand to his jaw. He looked upon it with some happiness, and nostalgia.

The scene changed.

It was a scene outside.

In the very center of a settlement was a district surrounded by thick walls of logs. Fields expanded outwards, and a river ran through. But it wasn't such a serene setting.

Knights rode their horses, and the soldiers marched in orderly lines.

Equipment, and numbers… there was certainly some regulation to them. Holding up a flag, and heading for the close, the armored mass walked peacefully through the settlement.

"What is this supposed to be? Normally, they'd put up a resistance if you go that far, right!"

The Sixth raised a laugh. It was a grand laugh, as he pointed at a certain point.

『What if you go far enough that resistance is pointless?』

Looking back, more knights and soldiers were walking in succession. They weren't only gathering on that path.

They gathered from the surroundings as they headed for that walled district.

The Sixth spoke nostalgically.

『Our father thought of the Walt House's martial law. But to fully actualize it, he would need those that had studied it stationed across the land. And he couldn't just teach everyone without discerning friend and foe. That's why we were necessary… he educated us, and trained us to be deployed in foreign land. He taught the daughters as well, and taught them to pass the doctrine to their children.』

"He did something like that?"

『Yeah. But at the time, it was so they could make it to the top in any House.』

I wondered whether there was really a need to go that far. In the Seventh's era, there's no doubt it had spread even further.

『Troop numbers, weapons, messengers, military regulations… it was around that time that an elite force that maintained all of those points was completed.』

That may be why the equipment looked uniform.

And the Sixth spoke.

『Look. The soldiers who climbed up the wall to look are dazed, aren't they? It's because this is the amount he could gather at a moment's notice!』

There's the fact it was still within the territory, but that means it was the Fifth's doing that created a situation where so many troops could be mobilized at once.

The surrounding feudal lords had tormented him enough for him to feel a need.

Looking at the town, an envoy hurriedly came out to negotiate.

The scene changed to a tent with Fredricks and Fiennes. In it were men with extra armaments.

The envoy was making a pale expression, as he looked at Fredricks sitting in his chare.

Next to Fredricks sat the woman, no longer in a village girl's clothes. Her mother was escorting her, and she hung her head as she sat.

Seeing her like that, her brothers of the same mother tried to stand, and attack the envoy. Their other siblings around held them back.

『Unhand me! You've heard what these guys have done to our sister, right!? Take his head, and make that our response!』

To his rampaging brothers, Fiennes spoke.

『Don't kill the messenger! That is our rule. If you want to kill him, wait for the battlefield, or after that.』

The envoy's face was pale.

『Count! We've sworn to enter your patronage! This treatment is too

much!』

And Fredricks sent a glance to his daughter casting her eyes down.

『… Tell this envoy what's happened to you. Your family will see to the rest of it.』

There, the woman kept her head hung, as she quietly began to recount.

『… Once you birth a boy, we no longer need you they said.』

The envoy's face grew paler, as he tried to correct a misunderstanding.

『T-that's wrong! That was when we were teaching her the rules of our House, and while we may have gone a little too far, we thought it best to be strict with our teachings.』

The sharp eyes around shut up the messenger, and the woman opened her mouth once more. Along with her siblings behind, were some other vassal nobles.
『… How many gold coins are the furnishings your mother gave you worth, they asked. A poor and unreliable house, they said.』

Crying, the woman used a hand to wipe her tears. The reactions around were cold ones. And there, Fredricks started laughing.

『I see, so I'm a broke noble, am I! Sorry about that. I've got so many children, there isn't much to go around. And then?』

The envoy sent a look to the woman, and his eyes were getting teary as well. Remembering everything that had been done, perhaps he was beginning to regret.

『… People of the Walt house should just be slaves. We're going to turn coat and take what we can, after all, so you need only hand over your noble blood. They took away my son… I haven't even held him before!』

Hearing that, whatever filled the tent had turned to a thirst for blood. Those around of vassal houses yelled at the envoy.

『So that was your intentions after all! Since you came under the same banner, you said to let your past misgivings slide… Count! Leave the vanguard to my House! As a house that has welcomed in a daughter of yours the same, I cannot forgive any such as he!』

There, Fiennes' siblings.

『After treating our sister like a slave? Don't screw with me! Hey, tell them to prepare to war once I get back! That's why I told you never to take up a House like this! The only one here who'll help you is the waning baron, so go try and sell yourself to him!』

The Sixth was smiling, but as I couldn't swallow the situation, I tilted my head.

"Waning? Um, what exactly happened?"

『Hmm? Ah, around this timeframe, the Baron House next door was on the decline. Well, they did do a toll on Walt House land. Look, the Fifth disinterestedly crushed all the bandits flowing in, and crushed a few mercenary brigades. He used quite some terrible means, but the Baron House that'd taken the opportunity to try and plunder… their knights were killed, and on top of no longer being capable of plunder, they lost their horses and equipment! What's more, with constant losses, they even lost their credibility!』

Hearing that, I got the general idea. The Fifth had endured.

He crushed the bandits invading, and crushed the mercenaries and men of other houses that had come to pillage and plunder. Meaning the Walt House was becoming a troublesome entity for its opposition.

"But if they're all part of the same country, doesn't repeated plunder drop credibility as it is?"

But the Sixth…

『It's actually quite common, you know. We put our municipal power into opposing, and using marriage politics, we increased our allies. It was true noble blood. Anyone would want it.』

A magician's blood. Even among nobles, there were quite a few Houses without that bloodline. So that's what the Fifth had made use of.

The envoy frantically tried to alter the explanation, but the flow was no longer changeable.

Fredricks stood.

『That's enough. Go back and tell him. To prepare his weapons.』

The envoy sat down on the spot, and sought assistance from the crying woman.

『Please help! At this rate, our land shall be annihilated! You'll never go through the same experience again! So I beg of you!』

The Fredricks…

『Then return my grandchild. I'll educate him myself. And present your Lord's head. The rest of him separately.』

After that, he declared he would crush the lord's vassal houses as well, for letting the present situation slide if they didn't.

"… Did they actually agree to that?"

The Sixth.

『Of course not. But it wasn't that hard.』

The images changed to a burning town. The mansion at its center was ablaze, and the woman held a baby in her hands.

"… Nothing around it is burning."

Looking around, the only thing on fire was the mansion itself. And the bodies of knights and soldiers littered the ground around it.

According to the Sixth.

『Once the envoy returned, and explained the situation, they began preparing for war. But their people weren't so eager. It was an army of ten thousand. They were already scared and surrounded. Well,

after that, the Walt House went on the offense, and this became something of a signal flare.』

Like that, what would happen if you went against the Walt House… the other pledged Houses were very well informed.

And it seems their reactions did change henceforth.

As Fiennes looked at the burning mansion, Fredricks came over to him.

And…

『Remember this. This isn't someone else's problem. If you hesitate in the slightest to make a decision, this is the Walt House's future. 』

Fiennes turned to him, and Fredricks handed the blue gem over.

『P-pops.』

『And that's the end of my job. You take up the rest. I'm retiring. I'm already tired at my age… Yeah, I leave the rest to you.』

Saying that, he gave a tired smile, and walked off.

The footage turned gray, and its time stopped before the Sixth spoke.

『We were surrounded by enemies, and we couldn't tell friend from foe around us. What we could rely on… right, perhaps it was the Forxuz House alone? So my father somehow managed to get it to take shape by our generation. Even now, I refuse to admit his methods were right, though.』

The fifth made a lot of children. But at the same time, that should've made a large problem. Fights within the family, meaning wars among siblings.

"Wait, could it be the Fifth… made sure that everyone in the family's hostility was direct at…"

Rather than the Sixth succeeding the House, he made sure all hostility went his way, to get the family together. Or at least that was how I saw it.

『No idea, is my honest answer. I never asked, but maybe? Who knows. The man will never say anything about it himself. But while we had plenty of fights amongst ourselves, it never came down to killing one another. Whenever something happen, we would gather as you saw, and fight an enemy together. There's plenty I only heard from my mothers after the fact. Looking back on it, I've found I can't deny it all.』

The surrounding scenery changed, and we were in the mansion's yard. The Sixth folded his arms, and called over to me.

『You see, Lyle… I only moved the army the Fifth had prepared. I was able to fight those around me and win, because the Fifth had prepared it all. The preparations for victory were assembled, and we won as if it were the natural course. That's all there was to it.』

The Sixth had greatly expanded the Walt House's land. But he told me it was only because of the Fifth's groundwork.

I spoke to him.

"That isn't all. You're strong, and reliable, Sixth."

When I said that, he turned around and laughed. Laughed, and…

『Glad you think so. I failed in various things, and ended up troubling Brod as well. He always ended up taking some distance from me.』

The Sixth's and Seventh's relationship was one I thought of as favorable. But these ancestors of mine had learned to not show it on their faces.

After letting out a deep sigh, the Sixth earnestly looked into my face.

『Lyle, let me teach you a Skill…【Real Spec】. That's my third Skill. It lets you take in even more information than before.』

According to him, it was of what state each party was in. In let you learn things in even more detail. But what I was thinking of wasn't the Skill.

"Why… it's not like it has to be now."

Hearing my clinging voice, the Sixth shook his head. His final Skill… the Sixth's third skill… teaching me his final stage Skill meant we were to part ways.

『No, it's because it's now. This is all I can do for you. Have the others support you the rest of the way. They're much more reliable than me.』

"But nothing's over. It's only just begun, hasn't it? And I'm still relying on you, Sixth!"

The sixth scratched his face with his fingertip, and gave a bitter smile.

『No, it's over. If you can't win, then that's all the man you are. But I believe you can win. So here's enough for me. No, I get the feeling that if it isn't here, I'll be lingering around forever. It isn't a bad feeling to stay behind. But you see, Lyle… our objective is to hand down our Skills to you. And that's been a bit… no, it's been stretched out quite some time. Just try using my Skill. All you have to do is think that you want to know more.』

I did as told, and tried using the Skill. The information I gained was on a different level from Search or Spec.

『You can use it alongside the Fifth's Skill, but it's one's amazing on its own. With so much info flowing in, it's quite a pain to master.』

When I used it, the sudden increase in input caused me to hold my left hand against my head.

The Sixth watched over me with a smile.

『You can't keep it up for too long, but it's quite convenient. But I'm sure you can master it in no time, so that's a load off my mind. With that, I've nothing left to regret.』

I wanted to say something. But… I recalled the regrets I'd felt with the First and Second. I had shown my deplorable state to the First al the way up to the end.

With the Second, my refusal had left it so I could never give a proper

parting.

So I forcefully formed a smile.

“T-thank you. I think you’re an amazing person, Sixth Generation. Um, you have your no-good parts, but, well… you’ve taught me a lot of things!”

The Sixth gave a gentle smile.

『I’d have liked to teach you even more. Ale, and the slots… adult fun as well! Well, I also had quite some fun teaching you, Lyle. While I’m at it, I leave Miranda and Shannon to you. Make sure you make them happy』

“So those are what you’ll make your last words? I know. I’ll do whatever I can.”

The Sixth joked around. And I matched him.

And as the surrounding picture started fading away in grains of light, the Sixth scratched his head.

『Ah~ as I thought, that one was a lie, the truth is, I still have one regret.』

That’s what he said. He was laughing, but he looked a little lonely.

“What is it?”

The Sixth put his hand on my shoulder.

『I never got to see you victorious. Riding a horse, and swinging around a halberd, I wanted to see your first campaign. No, that’s wrong… I wanted to see you stand against Celes. Good grief, even when I’m just supposed to teach you my Skills, I can’t help but want to look after you.』

“Then why not stay and wait a little longer?”

When I stated my mind, the Sixth shook his head again.

『I said it, didn’t I? If I did, I’d lose sight of when to hand it over evermore… stick out your chest, Lyle. If it’s you, you can do it. In my

life of failures, your one of my few points of pride. So much that I even want to give thanks from my side.』

When I opened my mouth, the Sixth's figure began to vanish.

『Lyle, thank you… and I believe that you can do it.』

"To me as well… Sixth, you're my pride! An ancestor I'm proud to have!"

Whether my words reached, or fell short… the Sixth smiled, and disappeared.

❼

When I woke, my face was covered in tears.

I touched my face to find I was crying after all.

"Even when I held it in. as I thought, I'm no good… I'm sure he saw me cry."

I raised the upper half of my body, and muttered, only to hear a response from the Jewel I'd placed on the bedside table.

It was the Fifth.

『… It's fine. It's not like he'd be angry about it.』

The Seventh thanked me.

『I give you my thanks, Lyle. I had always kept some distance from the Sixth. When he recommended me the halberd, I had turned him down. Even now, I can remember the lonesome look on his face from back then. When he was teaching you, he looked like he was truly having fun. Thank you, Lyle.』

I looked at Miranda sleeping in the bed next to mine. The outside of the window was still dark.

(There's no time for me to stay still. But just for now…)

I still had regrets within me. I should've had him teach me more. I

should’ve talked to him more.

Come to think of it…

(Come to think of it, the Sixth supported me from the start. He followed through for me. It’s going to get lonely again.)

I took the Jewel in my hand, and clenched it.

16 - Selva's Assassin

… Inside Lorphys' royal castle.

Its walls contained the room of Selva's second prince, 【Dario Selva】.

In his vast room, his chewed on the nail of his thumb, as he walked in circles.

A knight he had brought along as a guard from Selva cautioned him.

"Your highness, I'm not sure what to say about that behavior. We've sent documents on the current affairs to the country, so all that is left for us is to await orders."

Dario yelled at the knight.

"Cut the crap! As if you can understand how I feel! How oh miserable me was sent and sent back from both Galleria and Rusworth! I'm my brother's spare, I am. And yet finally comes the chance for me to hold a territory of my own! Yet that brat… that damn braaaatt!!"

After taking a flower vase in hand, and slamming it against the wall, Dario took some deep breathes, and sat down.

Second son. Living in a corner of his house as his brother's spare. Yet his brother up and matured without problems, so he was sent off to some foreign land to go get some children.

The countries of the war maiden, Galleria and Rusworth's princesses weren't interested, and he was sent to the small nation of Lorphys.

"… Once I became king, I planned to become a vassal nation at once! If Selva joined with Zayin, they'd have enough power to oppose Galleria and Rusworth…"

As the country held a border with the two constantly at intense war

with one another, Selva had a need to augment its national power.

Linking hands with Zayin, the deal was to let them do the plunder they wanted oh so badly, and have Selva rule over Loyphys' land afterwards.

An exhausted Lorphys would have no choice but to rely on Selva. A deal with Zayin had already been exchanged under the table, and Selva would act as an intermediary to end the war… that was the scenario.

"That brat! Because of him, they're going to turn their backs to me again!"

The knight let out a sigh before speaking to Dario.

"They're moving in a way that conceals their whereabouts, but it's impossible for them to get away. They will never reach fort Noinyl."

On those words, Dario.

"Then bring me his head at once! Because of a single boy, the entirety of Selva is facing a crisis! Why do you look so care-free!?"

Dario took out his rage on the knight that was there to guard him, but his head was full with how he was going to break the deadlock.

He had reported to the country, but the fact he wanted to achieve victory on his own no matter what may have been a result of his panic.

"Women, and an old man… They'll be taken care of at once."

The knight who was sure Lyle's group hadn't left showed off his leisure. Because there hadn't been a single report of them leaving the city…

❼

Lorphys' castle town.

Walking together with Miranda, I confirmed the presences

approaching us.

They were blatantly showing hostility, and even though it was still so bright out, they were keeping a fixed distance from us.

I tried using【Real Spec】to get some information on them, but there was too much info coming in to filter down.

When I held my head, Miranda entwined her arms around my own.

“Are you alright? You look pale.”

Hearing that, I shook my head.

“They’re coming. Six in number. Two groups of three, to be more precise. They’re watching us for now.”

“You can understand that much?”

I continued walking beside her.

“I’ve recently become able to. But I’m not used to using it.”

Miranda nodded a number of times, before sending a glance around. The six immediately took some distance, and Miranda rested her eyes on a food stall.

“Lyle, I want to eat that.”

“That? Sure, why not. We were never able to sightsee. So which one do you want?”

The atmosphere indicated the coming war, and the people walking around looked somewhat anxious. All I could hear was rumors of the war.

After buying some food from the stall, perhaps they had dropped their guard, as they had closed the distance again.

Miranda also sense the hostility. She took a bite, and asked me.

“Think they’ll attack us here?”

I’m sure they were following us to find out Aura-san, and the others’ whereabouts. They likely thought we were continuing our stay, and

that they had yet to leave.

“It’ll probably happen if we return to the inn. I did think this would happen, but… it seems this one’s from Selva alone.”

The only ones chasing us were from Selva. Lorphys wasn’t showing any moves on the surface.

From the Jewel, the Third spoke.

『It’s possible he doesn’t have too many sympathizers in Lorphys. Well, there’s only one pureblood princess, and if they’re choosing her a partner, they’ll give in at a Selvian prince, I guess. 』

If you want to look at the surrounding situation, Zayin didn’t have royalty. A little further away were the countries of Galleria and Rusworth, but it seems they were governed by women. The reports didn’t say anything about them having children.

The Fourth spoke.

『But they do seem a short-tempered bunch. Even so, if they had worked with Lorphys to attack us now, things would have gone quite favorably for us after recapturing Zayin.』

If they were going to attack, they might as well send Lorphys as well, it seems.

The Fifth as well.

『Because we’ll be able to smoke out those aiding Selva here. Well, if they won’t show their tails, then so be it.』

After taking a bite of the sweet from the stall, I spoke to Miranda.

“Want to walk through the town some more?”

There, she spoke a little disinterestedly.

“While being watched by such dangerous folks? If it’s a date, I don’t really mind.”

I gave a bitter smile.

“A date with so many chaperons? Now I have to wonder about that.”

And we continued walking through Lorphys. When noon came around, we ate our lunch, and started walking again. As we rested, and the sun started to fall, fewer people walked the streets.

And it was then that the pursuers made their move.

❼

After we purposefully entered a narrow alleyway, the six sent a team of three ahead to get the drop on us.

On the map in my head, the form of them hurrying forward to trap us was actually relatively interesting.

(This isn’t their home turf, so they’re a little lost.)

When me and Miranda raised our pace, we purposely ended up at a dead end.

“Here we are.”

I raised my hand, and used magic.

“Fire bullet.”

The ball of fire shot into the sky, before being sucked into the sky tinged with orange and purple.

The area around us was a bit spacious, but it was something of a garbage dump.

When I looked at the entrance, I saw the three knights that had gone out of their way to chase us.

Their outfits gave off an adventurer-esque feeling.

They looked a little tired, but I could tell they were doing their part not to show it. They had spent several hours of their day keeping watch over us, and at the end, they were lured in. There’s no helping their fatigue.

“… You are Lyle and Miranda, correct? I’ll have you lead us to Zayin’s Holy Maiden.”

Drawing their swords they started walking closer.

I spoke.

“The three that climbed onto the roofs haven’t gotten here yet, you know? I do recommend waiting just a little longer before you attack.”

The leader-ish man didn’t show any signs of distress. It was a bit sad.

“So you’re a Skillholder. If it’s Support-type, then I fear you not in battle. We’re two men and one woman. And our comrades will soon be here.”

I felt a swelling in the leader-ish man’s Mana. His body suddenly expanded, and his coat was ripper apart.

With his muscles bulging this much, it was as if he had become a mass of muscle in itself.

Miranda opened her mouth.

“Uwah, so there are these sorts of Skills as well.”

He was grinning, and his tone was gruffer than before.

“A support Skill will never be able to beat a Vanguard Skillholder such as myself. Kill the man. Extract the Holy Maiden’s location from the woman, then do whatever you want.”

His eyes were bloodshot, and he was highly excited.

The two subordinate-like ones took some distance from the leader-ish man. But perhaps he didn’t like that, as he ended up smacking one of them.

They collided with the wall, fell onto the floor, and stopped moving. They stopped drawing breath.

The Seventh spoke.

『An increase in power, and a loss of self-control? Hmm, that would be the【Berserk】Skill, perhaps? But who the hell chooses someone like that to pursue people?』

Fed-up as he was, he gave commentary in quite a calm voice.

The leader-ish man.

“Answer!”

“Y-yes sir!”

After his subordinate barked an answer, he turned, and came at me. I stopped Miranda as she moved to stand in front of me, and drew my sabre.

His body was big enough to make the sword in his hand look puny, but I went up regardless.

I didn’t use a Skill.

I dodged the slash he lowered, and cut at my opponent’s arm. What I had swung with an intent to lop it off only made a shallow cut with a bit of blood.

“You sure are hard.”

“What do you plan to do by getting so close to me, fool!”

He tried to grab me with his left hand, so I discarded my sabre, and grabbed that arm. After it let out a conspicuous grating sound, the leader-ish man’s belligerent smile started to warp.

Skill… 【Limit Burst】… The First’s second stage Skill.

“… No one said I only had one Skill.”

“B-bastard!”

As he raised his right sword hand, I tripped him up. I took my eyes off of him as he fell, to see the remaining enemy was already bound up by Miranda’s threads.

And seeing I was looking away, he tried to thrust out his blade. I

took a half-step to the side to avoid it.

Pulling out my reserve sabre, I stuck it into his head, and looked at the sky. After a few flashes of light, down came May in quilin form.

So I sheathed the sabre, collected up the one I'd dropped, and looked at Miranda.

"What shall we do now?"

The man on the ground was making a pale expression as he looked at us. But he kept his mouth closed, and glared.

After May landed on the ground.

"The three up top… I kinda ended up defeating them, but was that bad?"

Hearing that, I.

"Then I'll have to leave a message with this guy. 'Your Highness, your treatment of us brings a tear to my eye.' Could you pass that on?"

He was looking at the ground mortifyingly.

"Who can say. Just who's this highness you're talking about?"

In his last bit of resistance, the man tried to play dumb.

Whether he passed it on, or not, I didn't really care.

The fact that we fought here was the important part. Of course, none of our opponents, had anything to let one determine they were assassins of Selva. But with this, I knew how that country saw us.

I looked at Miranda.

"Will the strings come undone?"

"They'll disappear after a while. Though he may be like that a couple of hours."

After sending another glance at the man rolling across the floor, I ushered Miranda onto May's back. I hopped on after her, and May kicked off into the sky.

Lorphys' sky was growing dark, and I doubt there were many to confirm May's form. Even if there were, it would hold little meaning.

As we rapidly gained distance from the fortress, May explained the situation.

"People from the area are gathering at the fort. Around two hundred at the moment? And Zayin has still yet to move."

Hearing that, the Fourth sounded like he'd thought up a question.

『Still? By our plan, it was dubious whether you'd make it in time for the battle. What's taking them so long?』

To that opinion, the Third.

『… You properly let some get away, right? Come to think of it, it was a single knight that ran, right?』

The Fifth.

『Maybe he was attacked by monsters along the way. But in that case, you've some leisure. I don't want to waste too much time, though.』

There was much to worry about. It was going well, but food and equipment. Maintaining all that with our party alone was the limit.

The Seventh spoke.

『Perhaps they're preparing to send in more forces that anticipated. Around a hundred attackers… with strategic value in mind, I thought they would move around a thousand troops at most.』

The Third anticipated something.

『Even if he returned safely, there's no telling that the knight reported the numbers accurately. It may be the case that they're moving quite the forces there.』

The Fifth issued me some orders.

『Lyle, look at enemy movements on the way back. You may be pushing May, but confirm the terrain while you're at it.』

I spoke to May.

“May, can you fly a bit more? I want to confirm the enemy movements on the way back.”

There, May.

“More? Not that I mind.”

She seemed quite tired. Miranda put her arms around my stomach from behind, and raised her voice.

“Lyle, what are you thinking?”

I to her.

“No, rather than thinking…”

❼

… Within the temple… rather a castle of Zayin’s capital, the knight captain received the report.

He wore ceremonious armor, and was just about to head to the front lines when the notice had come in.

“You… you should have just sought aid from some other fortress out there!”

The one who threw the report papers back at the battered knight was a man named【Armand Benard】. The knight captain in his mid-forties was one of the proponents of the war.

The knight shook as he explained the situation.

“I hadn’t the slightest idea where the enemy had laid their hands! They suddenly attacked the fortress with five hundred men, and staying in the area without being discovered was an impossible feat! In order to bring this report back, I frantically raced on my horse!”

A vexed Armand found it quite strange that the knight before his eyes wasn’t wearing any armor.

“Without any equipment? You’re not going to say you ran away, are you!?”

“I lost it in a battle with a monster! Even so, I desperately came all the way…”

Because of the continuous angry screams from the captain’s office, the news was heard outside. Taking a consecrated virgin along, a single young girl entered the room.

Her long silver hair was done in ringlets. She wore the uniform of a Holy Maiden over her body, and her emerald eyes took in the knight captain.

“Armand, what is the meaning of this? Did you not dispose of Aura and Thelma who fled?”

Armand put a knee on the ground, and the worn-out knight did the same.

“N-no, this is but an unreliable piece of information.”

【Remis Zayin】… As the current Holy Maiden, she was aware of the rumors going through the country.

“There was a rumor that Aura evaded my assassination, and gathered soldiers in Beim to stand against us, was there not?”

“W-without any evidence, it can only be a rumor.”

Remis spoke in a fed-up tone.

“Oh she definitely did it alright. From what I heard, the rumors said a hundred. But five hundred soldiers, you say? Does that not mean she’s found someone to back her? We cannot leave her be like this, right?”

Captain Armand wanted to go off to the front line, and take charge of his troops at once. He had waited oh so long for this day to come.

(Little girl. A decoration should just act like a decoration. But I truly cannot leave them as they are… if we’re mobilizing troops, it will be a thousand to two thousand. But if that fails…)

Close to twenty thousand troops were moving.

There were mercenary brigades as well, so a precise count was still uncertain. However, not all of them were soldiers capable of battle. There were support squadrons for the rear. The current state of affairs held around fifteen to fourteen thousand capable of battle.

(At the very least, it'll be harder to push back Lorphys. And who should I send? The mercenaries lowered their down payments with the prospects of plunder, so I can't think they'd move for internal affairs.)

Even Armand hesitated to give them free reign to plunder.

But in that case, how many soldiers could they send?

(Should I leave them be? But I can't think they'll make too grand a move…)

As Armand frantically thought it out, Remis spoke.

"Yes, that's enough. I will give an order. Send three thousand troops."

"Three thousand!? That is excessive force. Here, we should send a thousand to test the waters, and root them there. Even if they took a fortress from us, they shouldn't be able to move from it. After we've returned, we can deal with them at our leisure!"

But Remis was irritated.

"Even whilst there are rumors that I fear Aura's little rise? What's more, when the common knowledge is that they have a hundred, you want it to appear to the people that we fear such a number?"

Armand panicked.

(What's the meaning of this. Why did such rumors… the rumors are spreading too fast since that one brought the information back. Could it be there really is a mole? No, we banished all Thelma's allies to the remote lands without fail. I see, so they're purposely leaking it!)

The fact that wasn't strange at all was Zayin's current state.

(Since they can't be in the temple, the probability of them having infiltrated the city is high. But with so many mercenaries going back and forth, finding them will be… who shall I send? If one of our allies really was to be a mole… in this case, I should be the one going.)

Putting off punishing the knight to a later date, Armand stood.

"Understood. I will take three thousand elite soldiers and head for Fort Noinyl at once."

Three thousand. With that number, Normand thought it possible to beat down the five hundred men the knight told tales of.

Remis was surprised at the sudden change in Armand's behavior.

(I'm doubtful as to whether there's really five hundred. There's the possibility he reported less as more. But even if they're lesser in number, three thousand will be able to take them down.)

Armand couldn't trust most of the knight's report. And as the enemy wouldn't leave the fortress, he thought to crush them with numbers.

There, Remis.

"Of course you aren't. In the first place, your job is to be my guard."

The Divine Knights. Their original duty was to be the Holy Maiden's guard. Her shield. But while calling itself a theocracy, it was a country that had repeated pillage and plunder and war with its surroundings.

That role had been reduced to a public stance.

In truth, Armand's House had been a knight house for generations, and besides the fact they didn't exactly call themselves nobles, they differed not from the other countries out there.

"Oh Holy Maiden, aren't you the one who said it was important? I will personally take command, and raise a festival of blood upon that rebellious lot."

After Armand pressed forth his own way, he called out to the knight.

“Come. I’d like to hear the specifics. Well then, Holy Maiden, I must beg your pardon.”

(Hmm, we can find any number of replacements for you, girly.)

If Remis was to be killed, then the assassinating Aura wouldn’t be able to gain the support of the people. Armand knew that, and thought that it didn’t really mattered if Remis dropped dead.

Walking off, Armand looked at her with annoyed eyes…

17 - Sacred Knight

Inside the fort.

In a place that looked to be a conference room, I moved pieces on a map in accordance to the recon I had done with May.

The important members were gathered, and there were three large game pieces crossing the map.

Creit-san cried out.

“T-three thousand!? N-no, we have some soldiers gathered from the surroundings. Around three hundred capable of battle. Then with that number…”

We may be able to do something. When we was about to say that, he put his hand to his mouth, and thought.

I looked at the top of the map.

(The three thousand soldiers are elites dispatched from the capital… on top of that, they have enough weapons to siege. Isn’t that a bit of a treasure?)

I looked to Thelma-san. Hearing of three thousand, she had crossed her arms in front of her chest. A gesture that looked as if she were praying.

“Thelma-san, would three thousand be a majority of Zayin’s forces? Ah, by forces, I mean the forces they keep in the capital.”

Thelma-san spoke to me.

“I can’t speak in precise numbers. In my generation, there was an extreme decline in war, so there was an increase in population. If they recruited from the area, I believe they would be able to maintain four thousand.”

Gastone-san.

“If you include the squadrons from across the land, it would be ten and five thousand. They can’t pull much of that from the border.”

He seemed to think we wouldn’t be able to accomplish our role, so I shook my head.

“That’s enough. Are the capital’s unit of higher quality than the provincial ones?”

The sensory input I got from May, and my Skill【Real Spec】showed numeric values that indicated our foe surpassed us in terms of equipment.

Thelma-san to me.

“They’re better trained, and the quality of their equipment is high. In my time, I had maintained them at one thousand.”

Military might was a necessity, but the uptake cost was high. Even if that number was recruited from the populace, just how much would have to go into training and equipment…

(Even if we’re to fight a defensive battle from the fort, it isn’t an unwinnable battle.)

When I thought that, a sarcastic voice came from the Jewel. It was the Third.

『How could this be! The enemy is sending three thousand elites!』

The Fourth as well.

『Thinking about it normally, when they learned our numbers, I thought they would sent a thousand at most. Does that make the enemy command a skilled one, or not?』

The Fifth was…

『We can win on the defense, but we’d lose in a war.』

I won’t way we can’t beat three thousand enemies. But it wouldn’t reflect well on our next actions. In that case, we wouldn’t get the essential result we wished for.

The Seventh too.

『If they're evaluating us accurately, they have quite a commander on them. In truth, with three thousand, even if we ambush them in an open field, I'm sure they could get back at us.』

Right, the land around Noinyl was open plains. And in such fields, numbers couldn't help but do the talking.

But the Third and up…

『Then we don't have to fight them at all! How bold of them to leave their citadel open! I'd never do anything like that!』
『Just abandon the fortress! And aim for…』
『… The capital. Thinking of their remaining forces, that's sounds best.』
『We could increase our troops in the villages along the way. It does seem the capital and provinces have a different set of values, after all.』

… And the abandonment of the fortress was decided.

When I touched the Jewel, the Third explained.

『It's not that you can't win, but you'll pile up casualties, and there's a possibility you'll be rendered immobile for some time, right? And as the other side has taken out siege weapons, their movement speed will be slow. In contrast, we have small numbers… there are numerous paths that lead to the capital, while your enemy will feel prideful with its numbers. Uwah, things are coming together so well it's actually scary.』

The information I got from May was precisely displayed in my head. While they were keeping wary of their surroundings, their movements were clearly making light of us.

The Fifth spoke.

『Also. If you have Zayin's people fight themselves ragged amongst themselves, it'll become a pain later. While I'm at it… if the enemy mainly consists of inhabitants of the capital, it'll be advantageous if we go on the defense.』

I thought.

(Even when they have the terrain advantage? And even if we take down the capital, will everything really go as we want it? If the populace itself opposes up, isn't that the end?)

And as I thought to myself, the members around looked anxious. The Seventh let out his voice.

『Lyle, don't forget the Sixth's words. Have some confidence… don't let your men worry. And this battle is proceeding quite favorably.』

That opinion differed from mine, but if the ancestors were saying it, I chose to believe in them. I raised my face, laughed, and spoke to everyone.

"We're abandoning the fort. And we'll go into recruiting soldiers from the villages and towns as we make our way for the capital. Gastone-san, please indicate the villages that would be easiest to take in. Ah, this is the enemy's likely trajectory, so only ones away from that, please."

Shen I said that, everyone was dumbfounded.

Aria looked at me as she acted as a representative to speak everyone's opinion.

"Eh? The capital… are you serious? I mean, its defenses are much more amazing than what we've got here, aren't they?"

The one to answer was Aura-san. While looking at me.

"In these cases, wouldn't the usual route be to take down nearby fortresses?"

There, the Third in the Jewel let out his voice.

『That's wrong. No matter how much a decoration they may be… the King… no, in this case, the Holy Maiden. If we take the Holy Maiden, then at that very moment, it becomes our victory. Even if you call them a figurehead, that has nothing to do with the people. Now then, our plans went a little off course, but let's have some fun with this!』

I smiled.

“It’s alright. It’s only become easier than planned. Also, the capital will likely use their mercenary brigades to intercept us. Now then, let’s get into the preparations.”

I hit my hands together twice, and everyone’s faces were taken aback.

I tried to soften the mood with a light joke…

“Let’s have some fun with it.”

When I said that, the surrounding expressions looked appalled. I was trying to lighten the mood, but as I thought, it seems I’m not suited to jokes.

❼

… It was a town on the border of Zayin and Lorphys.

The mercenaries of Zayin’s side had gathered, looking forward to the orders to attack, as they waited.

But according to the notice that had come in, the supreme commander, the knight captain had headed for Fort Noinyl to subjugate the former Holy Maiden who’d taken a stand.

So yet another postponement was made.

A majority of the brigades had contracted for cheap. The reason being that pillaging Lorphys was permitted, and they could swipe whatever they wanted.

But if they weren’t attacking there wasn’t anything to steal. The small skirmishes didn’t generate any real profit, and the mercenaries’ dissatisfaction built up by the day.

In a place like that, Albano struck up a conversation with one of the brigade chiefs.

“Bloody hell! If that’s the case, we should’ve tried our luck

elsewhere!”

Hitting his cup a number of times against the small round table, the chief put his displeasure to words. Albano was the same.

“I know, right? Hired at a bargain, and put on standby. In that case, it’d be much better to find work elsewhere.”

The chief agreed. But there was a reason he was out drinking with Albano.

“Albano, is it really that Holy Knight brigade from Beim? The former Holy Maiden who formed it only had up to a hundred soldiers, right?”

It was to gather information.

“Yeah, no doubt about it. That was the number in Beim. But she’s quite a popular one. A sharp one to top it off.”

Hearing that, the chief didn’t show a reaction. So Albano…

“It may be that the knight captain’s going to lose.”

The chief laughed.

“Now that sounds nice! If that high and mighty Divine Knight pretending to be a noble loses, it’ll finally be our turn.”

There, Albano spoke tiredly.

“You sure are stupid. In all actuality, if the knight captain falls, it’ll be the end. If the three thousand elites of the capital lose, how do you think they’re going to fight Lorphys?”

Hearing that, the chief put his hand to his chin. This side still had the numerical advantage, but for Lorphys, their country itself was at stake.

He could anticipate they would put up a harsh resistance.

Albano…

“And it’s only a hundred, you see. At most, four or five hundred, yet they’ll send three thousand? Zayin’s top dogs desperately want that

former Holy Maiden to disappear, or so the rumor goes. I'm thinking there's something dark going on in the back rooms."

Hearing that, the chief slapped his hand on the table. When he removed, it there were a few silver coins left behind.

"Speak your mind. Based on its contents, I may up your reward."

With his brigade's members' lives in his hand, the chief needed to know as much as he could. Because based on how things turned out, there was the possibility it would take a turn for the worst.

Albano took the coins, and took a swig of ale.

"You sure are generous. Then I'll sell you a special one. I learned it in Beim, but Selva's moving strangely. You know how their second prince was sent in as a groom, right? What's more, before the former Holy Maiden made it to Beim, the Divine Knight elites moved to get rid of her."

"The proof?"

Albano took out the sword hung at his waist, and left it on the table. It was a dagger without any engravings on it. A dagger of the Divine Knights.

But as a weapon held by the assassination squad, there was nothing on it to identify its source. It was too weak to serve as evidence.

"I got it from an acquaintance who defeated them. That former Holy Maiden… it's possible she's got a hold on some considerably bad information."

"That doesn't serve to prove anything."

(As I thought. But I only need him to infer I have a connection with Lyle. After that…)

"Don't rush me. In truth, they did get attacked. It's also true they ran to Beim, and it's true that they gathered personnel. That's why the elites are being sent to Fort Noinyl… it's possible the one moving behind this war is Selva. They may be planning to play hero, and beat us down once we've damaged Lorphys."

The Chief.

“For what sake?”

“Who knows… but if they save a tattered Lorphys, won’t Selva’s influence in the area rise?”

Albano let him infer the implication that the mercenaries were there to act as sacrifices to that cause…

❼

… Fort Noinyl.

Before it stood the dumbfounded figure of Armand on his horse.

“… What does this mean?”

He had surrounded the fortress, set up the siege weapons, and begun the assault. Upon arriving, there wasn’t the slightest sign of the enemy, so he made sure to keep watch of the area as well.

But even after they attacked the fortress, there wasn’t the slightest reaction. After they easily destroyed the gate, and sent their soldiers in, all that awaited was empty space.

A messenger ran up to give a report.

“Captain! They left this behind.”

What the messenger held was a single sheet of paper.

On it…

『We’re taking the capital. Want to see if you can get there before its fall?』

… Was written, and Armand clenched and crushed it in his hand.

“That conniving wench! All forces, set out for the capital at once!”

Conniving wench… he meant Thelma.

There, his adjutant knight spoke up.

“Please wait! After marching so far, the soldiers are showing signs of fatigue. And if we are to move after dismantling the siege engines…”

“Fool! Taking only those that can move is fine! If things go as they are, the capital will fall!”

The adjutant.

“No way. The enemy number five hundred at most. And even now, there is close to a thousand able fighting men in the capital. It won’t fall so easily.”

Hearing that, Armand muttered a, ‘that’s true,’ but he still had his misgivings.

“… Even so! Return at once! Rearrange the troop formations for mobility!”

The adjutant responded, but his expression was one showing doubt of Armand…

❼

… Zayin’s capital.

The gate should have been sealed tight.

But it was wide open. The enemy soldiers flooded in. even so, there weren’t any traces of the gate having been forced open.

There was an element of negligence to it, bud before anyone knew it, they had breached the gate, and opened it.

They had permitted themselves onto the grounds of the sacred temple.

Armored knights held up their weapons at the enemies coming in. What the knights protected was Remis… the Holy Maiden.

The enemy before them had bloodstains over his armor of blue and while. He wore a helmet with a faceplate, so they couldn't see his face.

Remis looked at that knight who seemed to be leading the charge, and shook.

"What is this; what are you people!!?"

On her words, her own knights tried to slash at him, but he cut them down with the sabre in his right hands.

And that knight in the most conspicuous attire wiped the blood off his blade, and spoke to Remis surrounded by the other temple virgins.

"You're Remis Zayin, correct?"

As a shaking Remis was unable to respond, a familiar girl walked up from behind that enemy knight.The enemy force opened up a path as Aura boldly walked up to stand before her.

"There's no doubt about it. It's Remis…"

Seeing aura's slightly sorrowful expression, Remis spoke.

"Do you understand what you've done!? This is rebellion! Doing all this just to get back at losing to me… don't think it'll end well for you!"

There, Aura replied.

"Could it be you're counting on Selva?"

Remis twitched, and sent her field of vision around the room. Aura didn't let that slide.

"… I already know you've linked hands with Selva."

There, Remis went into a frenzy.

"What of it!? That old crone may not know, but that's Zayin! That's what we've done to come all the way here!"

Aura spat out a sigh.

“As I thought.”

Remis hurriedly averted her eyes.

(What is the meaning of this? Didn’t that Armand head out for the fort? Could it be these guys defeated Armand?)

In her fear, Remis began to reconsider the scale of the enemy forces.

(They defeated three thousand, and managed to invade us? What does this mean… don’t you need three times the resident force to take a castle!?)

A feminine armored knight extended strings from her fingertips to bind her and the other virgins. Restrained on the floor, Remis looked up at Aura.

“Hah, what’s with that pervert garment you wear!? Your lacking chest is on full display!”

Remis put up a strong front, but Aura leaned in, and spoke.

“I’m sorry, but we’ll be having you die for us.”

“… Eh?”

Remis looked upon Aura’s smile with weary eyes…

❼

After imprisoning the Holy Maiden, we boldly declared in the temple.

“The Holy maiden Remis has fallen before the true Holy Maiden… before Aura Zayin! Throw down your weapons! Surrender, and your lives shall be spared!”

When Gastone-san gave that same declaration in the plaza out front, the people began to gather. And they seemed dumbfounded at the news of the rebellion ending before they knew it.

When the soldiers stationed on the ramparts heard the ruckus, and

returned to the temple, they found that everything was already over.

I watched over them, as I made sure that no one was making any suspicious movements.

Light… I wore extremely light armor for appearance alone, and used the Skill【Connection】to establish communication with a separate detachment.

『Aria, how are things on your side?』

I received a reply.

『The knights have been disarmed. And wait, it seems they don't know the scope of our forces.』

Before dawn, the squadron that rode May over the walls… she carried us, and we opened the gates

After that, we only pressed forward, and pushed all the way to the temple.

At dawn, it didn't take too long to bring an end to it all.

I checked in with Eva.

『Eva, how fare the ramparts?』

『The gate has been closed, and the enemy has yet to come. Well, even if they're returning, it'll take a few days regardless of how they rush, won't it?』

Inside the temple.

There were still some who'd holed themselves inside, so I had Creit-san and co. deal with those.

I guided Novem and Miranda, and notified them of the position of hidden enemies.

『Miranda, one's hiding in the next room.』

『I know.』

On the map in my head, the red and blue, and yellow points moved

around. It was possible to share that info with everyone, but as they weren't used to it, it ended up causing headaches.

So I verbalized the info, and cleaned up the temple interior.

『Don't kill too much.』

When I said that, Miranda…

『If they don't resist, I'll consider it.』

At that moment, Thelma-san began an address to the people gathered outside. In order to persuade them, and to refer them to Aura-san.

I decided to concentrate there.

(We have around six hundred… we have to get this area under control, whatever the means.)

We haphazardly gathered troops as we moved, and led them into the capital.

The armor I wore was a fake made by Monica. The reason for its low weight was because it wasn't only metal. It also had wooden parts, and it was only there to look the part.

Because we didn't have time to prepare it.

(Damn, why have we been pressed into this last-second situation?)

I was panicking inside, as I grandly stood to watch over Thelma-san and Aura-san's address.

I heard voices from the Jewel.

Third and up.

『With this, you have a Holy Maiden in your hands.』
『And a national treasury at that.』
『Since it's come to this, the mercenaries' movements will change.』
『Hmm… we'll have to send a message to Lorphys. That the time has come.』

They were taking their time. As always, they were reliable in times like these.

But the amount of voices I could hear had gone down. I felt a bit lonely, as I inclined an ear to the speech, and kept watch.

18 - Holy Knight Lyle

From atop the ramparts, I looked at the enemies approaching Zayin's capital.

The numbers deployed outside the gate looked to be around twenty thousand.

There weren't any mercenaries participating. More than that, there were few siege weapons to be found. The troop morale was exceedingly low.

"They don't want to point a bow at their homeland, I see."

Before the army that had arrived before Zayin's capital on the fourth day, I looked at the hesitant troops, and muttered.

Our side was the same. The recapture was successful, but our converted allies were hesitant to point bows at those that were their comrades not but several days before.

I touched the Jewel as I reflected on how I hadn't anticipated that.

(I'm glad we avoided wat. If we properly went at each other, the fissure between Zayin's capital and provinces would widen. And after entering the capital, there wereplenty of soldiers who didn't feel it right on an emotional level.)

After taking control of the temple, the soldiers sided with us.

The Holy Maiden was no longer there, so weighing the odds, it would be comparatively easier just to join our side. As I thought, the Holy Maiden held an important meaning to this country.

The morning sun rose, and I watched the enemy show no signs of movement as I thought.

"The mercenaries gave up on them, did they? What's more, they haven't even begun to assemble their siege weapons…"

A voice came from the Jewel.

It was the Fourth.

『They won't attack their home, that sort of thing. It's laughable when you think of what they planned to do to another country of humans. What's more, the funds are now in our hands. Mercenaries are cold ones to employers who can't pay.』

The Seventh.

『Too many have chosen to go along with it. The capital has already fallen. The enemy doesn't have a clear grasp of our side, and our Holy Maiden has already officially declared them traitors.』

Aura-san was named the official Holy Maiden, and she recognized the Holy Knights as the official standing army. Those that abided the Divine Knights were proclaimed as a rebel army.

That was actually surprisingly effective, and the enemy was flustered.

(Ornament or not, the Holy Maiden is the Holy Maiden.)

The Fifth spoke.

『I doubt they ever thought you guys would be able to take it with six hundred. Perhaps they think you have three thousand or more? There were opposing factions within the country, after all.』

And suspicion turns shadows to ogres. They thought there may be traitors within the country.

(Not that they're wrong.)

When I watched the unmoving enemy, Clara beside me spoke.

"Lyle-san, are you just going to glare at one another like that? It looks like they could crush us just like that."

I shook my head.

"I have an idea for before it comes to that."

I turned, and behind me were the some of the soldiers' families. Clara stared at me quite harshly.

“Lyle-san, you’re really doing it?”

I nodded.

“Of course. Wouldn’t that be best? I want to keep the casualties as low as possible.”

The one who suggested this dirty tactic was the Third. But all I needed to do was make an opening. We had around five hundred soldiers with proper equipment…

Making preparations to attack.

“Now, shall we begin?”

❼

… The sun rose, and Zayin’s gate became clearly visible.

The one looking at the gate, that appeared even more sturdy than usual, was Armand. He exited his tent in his armor, saw the depressed figures around, and snapped.

“Don’t be deceived by the likes of a false Holy Maiden!”

The declining troop morale was to an extent where it was clearly visible to the naked eye. Regardless of his orders, they didn’t even try to put together the siege weapons.

Even if they did, their movements held no vigor. Receiving rebel army treatment, the knights followed the examples of the soldiers around them.

Most of the soldiers gathered from the provinces already felt like running upon being called rebels by former Holy Maiden Thelma. She was one who specialized in internal affairs, who turned an eye not only to the capital, but to all territories equally.

And the result that Remis had been killed.

That was a painful one.

There wasn't a Holy Maiden left to recognize them. Armand seemed quite irritated as he listened to the voices of his soldiers.

"I can't point my bow there. My family's in those walls. Don't know what I'll hit."
"Me poor ol' mum… set fire to the city, an' she won't be able to get out."
"What's this. Even after you called it an easy win, the knights aren't of any use at all."

Armand began to panic. It wasn't just the provincial soldiers, the lowered morale was quite severe among the capital soldiers as well.

(Don't panic. We have twenty thousand. Take out the rear supports, and that still leaves fifteen thousand. The other side has three or four thousand at most… otherwise, they would never have been able to reach the castle while evading our advance. We even have siege weapons. If I force them to work, and push them back…)

After he thought that far, a voice came from atop the wall. It didn't belong to a soldier.

When Armand hurriedly looked up the wall, he saw the residents of the town.

"Marco, come home! You can still make it!"
"Dear, do you really plan on attacking us!? Get over here at once, and apologize!"
"Daddy! Pwease come home."

Atop the ramparts stood the families of the soldiers. And a man in full plate armor came out, and made a bold declaration.

"I am Creit, vice-captain of the Holy Knights! Gentlemen, rebel army gentlemen! If you wish to fight, we'll stop you not. But can you bring yourselves to attack the city with the ones you should be protecting!? If it's now, we shall not charge the sin of aiding a rebel force! Throw down your weapons, and surrender at once! The same goes for the soldiers of the provinces! If you wish to fight without dissolution, then we shall take you on!"

Armand muttered.

“T-these guys, aren’t they embarrassed at all!? Putting up unarmed civilians on the battlefield!? Oy, start the preparations to attack at…”

Armand cried out, but a single soldier stepped forward, and dropped his weapons.

“I’m sick and tired of this! I’m running away, captain! As if I’ll heed your words to point a weapon at my family! You can go fight for yourself!”

He was a man with short blond hair, and he threw his weapons and walked off in quite a conspicuous way. Seeing him, Armand thought…

(I don’t know that man… could he be a setup from Thelma…!)

And then another. One by one, the soldiers cast aside their weapons, and parted from the base camp.

“H-halt! Do not flee! Deserting under enemy fire is a capital crime! I repeat, do not flee!”

They ran away in droves, the knights unable to stop it gathered in front of Armand.

“Captain! It’s impossible! There’s no stopping them anymore!”

Watching the soldiers begin to flee, Armand felt blood flow down his clenched fist.

“Something like this… without even fighting… for me to lose. In these twenty years… just what sentiment did I feel to endure it…”

Not long after Armad had enlisted in the Divine Knight Brigade, the Holy Maiden changed to Thelma. And then, they suddenly stopped invading other countries as they had altogether.

Putting her efforts to internal affairs, she wouldn’t prepare a battlefield for the men who’s lived their lives to fight.

“Cowards and traitors! Are the weapons in your hands mere decorations!!?”

He yelled at the gates, and slowly, they began to open. Behind them,

the mounted knights were ready to fight…

❼

The gate opened.

Mounted, I removed the Jewel around my neck, and gripped it in my right hand.

Before us were panicking soldiers. And noticing us, the knights hurriedly took their weapons in hand, and got on their horses.

After I took a deep breath behind my faceplate, I heard a voice from the side. Aria to my left wore red armor as she called out to me.

She held up her spear on horseback, and her form was that of a knight in itself.

“What are you getting nervous about now?”

On my right, Miranda wore green armor and called over to me. The reason we all wore conspicuous colors was to concentrate attention on us.

“You sure get nervous at some strange times. Infiltrating the temple was much more dangerous.”

The others were Creit-san, and adventurers that had once been knights…

And behind them were fully armed soldiers. We were able to coordinate them a bit over the few days we had, but attack and rotate was all we could manage.

Complex formations were impossible; furthermore, it didn’t hold much purpose on this specific battlefield.

I brought my right hand up to shoulder level, and held it up front. When I clenched it, it let off a blue light, and a silver halberd manifested.

It resembled the one the Sixth held, and it had an advantageous

point of not consuming too much Mana. I held it under my armpit, and gave the orders to everyone.

“Aim for the Divine Knight Brigade! Don’t bat an eye at the soldiers! The enemy knight captain’s head alone. Then it will be our win! … ATTACK!!”

I urged forward the horse, and the other riders followed. A majority of the enemy soldiers had dispersed, so we were able to launch an attack on the unorganized knight brigade without any resistance.

To the knight that raced at me with a lance, I swung my halberd sideways, cutting through lance ant all.

Aria also spun her spear, and pierced through the knights gathered around her.

Miranda parried the spear of a knight with the dagger in her right hand, let out strings from her left, and dropped them from their horse.

When she immobilized enemies, the soldiers following behind would finish them off.

Creit-san was also fighting enemies on horseback, and pushing them back. Perhaps it was just a matter of personal ability, but he seemed to be relying on his battle experience as an adventurer.

However, there really was a problem with our coordination.

(He’s too fixated on it.)

When I looked at Creit-san, a horseman’s spear came at me from my blind spot. I turned it aside with my Halberd in one hand, used my left to dray my sabre, and pierced it into the gaps of his armor.

Blood spurted out of the crevice. Without pulling my sabre out, I let it go. As the knight fell from his horse, the Fifth let out his voice.

『Splendid. For your first time, that is. Look, it’s the all-important supreme commander… the knight captain.』

Hearing that, I took my eyes off the intense battle around me, and

turned myself towards the Divine Knights Brigade Captain… Armand Bernard.

He cut down a member of the Holy Knight brigade, and they fell motionless to the ground. Looking at his weapon, I opened my eyes wide.

As fate would have it we each held a halberd in our hands.

My opponent raised his face plate, and yelled at me. Was it resentment, or anger? I'm not sure, but he looked at me with bloodshot eyes.

"So you are the leader of the rebel camp! Let yourself be cut down by me! I'll send that woman not long after!"

I didn't take off my own helmet to respond. The faceplate didn't have an open and shut function installed in it. I wasn't inclined enough to go as far as to take off my helmet to talk to him.

There, the third spoke.

『Lyle, at least say your name. Because this will be the end of it.』

I held up my Halberd.

"Captain of the Holy Knight Brigade… Lyle Walt. You're the Divine Knight Brigade Captain, correct? I'll happily take you on."

"A-a child… just how much will she make a fool of me!?"

Hearing my voice, perhaps he inferred I was still young, as his face turned even redder. He lowered his visor, and the eyes I could see threw them were glaring as if to shoot me to death.

One on one combat between generals on the battlefield. I never really thought it would come to that. I mean, the enemy had no archers, or soldiers around to protect them.

As Divine Knight after Divine knight was taken down, Armand his his foot against his horse's stomach, to send it galloping at me.

Sparks flew as our halberds crossed paths.

The Seventh spoke.

『As expected a captain of knights, his weapon's quite a piece of work. Lyle, fight him to your heart's content.』

His body larger than mine was swinging around his polearm with unmatched power. After blocking a blow, my horse couldn't endure it, and stooped a little.

And after lifting it up, he swung it freely left and right. I blocked, parried, and continued looking at him through the scattering sparks.

"What's wrong, kid!? Is that all you've got!? That's all!? Twenty years! The feelings I've held down for twenty years of my life, are you worthy of them!!?"

I blocked, repelled, and gradually warded off his blows, destroying his stance on his horse.

He tried to take some distance, but I followed him forward. I wouldn't give him that chance.

The surroundings had quieted down to watch our fight.

And I could understand just how much he had polished his skills. Yet the reason he swung his weapon was terrible.

"Do you want to steal so badly? Do you wish for war so much? For what sake!?"

On my words, Armand.

"That is what a knight is. Are you nobles not the same!? Fight, steal, and gain glory! What difference does it make!? A brat like yourself who knows nothing of war should just shut his mouth! Don't try to act smart, ignorant kid!"

Armand didn't mean it when he said it, but it felt to me as if he was insulting the Sixth. I gritted my teeth.

There, I heard a voice from the Halberd. No, a voice from the glowing blue Jewel embedded in its axe portion.

『Right, no different. It's true we're the worst trash you could find.』

『Right, right. One wrong step, and we're no different than bandits. Plain trash.』

『But you see, trash has its trashy pride. Don't lump us together with you guys who only know how to rage about!』

『Hmm, not a knight, and not a bandit. You're just trash that's convinced itself it's just. I'd be troubled if you lumped us together.』

I felt that the Fifth's tone was more stern than usual.

(Did he think of the Sixth, and get angry…)

I took a strong swing to knock the blow he lowered at me aside. His stance crumbled, as I noticed his shortness of breath.

"Truly, nobles are trash as well! There are plenty of horrible ones among them!"

I started on the offense, and Armand turned his weapon to defend. Numerous sparks flew, causing Armand opened his eyes wide.

"Even so!"

I raised mine overhead, and lowered it. When he blocked it, the force sent him flying backwards, horse and all.

"They aren't like you, they aren't entities that can only live by taking! There are splendid men among them!"

Lifting my halberd again, I saw his had been repelled upwards, leaving his chest wide open.

I got the feeling I saw the Sixth's form. The sixth who fought to extend the territory, but to get to that point his life had taken a number of turns.

He had attacked other lands, just as Armand had. But he had a reason for that.

(They aren't the same! The Sixth… isn't the same as you!)

The Fifth endured it, the Sixth went on the offence. It was to protect it. If they were going to be attacked forever, they determined that

they would never be able to defend the territory, so…

“Don’t lump them together!”

After changing my grip, I swiped it horizontally.

A horizontal gash appeared on Armand’s armor, and from it, a large mass of blood flowed out. Still mounted, gripping his halberd, Armand collapsed onto his horse’s neck.

He raised his face to glare at me.

“K-kid… go to hell.”

As his words shut me up, a voice came from the Jewel. It was the Third.

『Lyle, try using【Mind】. Show him. That we aren’t the only ones who’ll fall into hell.』

I pointed my left hand at him.

“Don’t worry. I’m already resolved for that. Do you think I’m compassionate enough to forgive you?”

Skill… Mind… It was a Skill that influenced the mind.

Shook it up, and confused an enemy’s heart. But by taking into account the time and place. And by using just a bit of suggestion…

“Can you hear it? The voices of the sinless souls you’ve killed for your fame? Can you see them? Those arms wrapping around you, and dragging you down to hell?”

There, Armand’s complexion turned pale.

Perhaps he remembered something, as he shouted out a name.

“Zauro! T-that’s wrong! That was an accident! An accident I tell you! U-uwaaaah!! Don’t touch me; don’t touch me!”

As blood poured out from his chest, Armand threw down his halberd, and tried to pry something I couldn’t see off of him

The surrounding friends and foes were looking upon the scene.

“There was no choice! I didn’t have a choice! Those were orders! I wasn’t at fault! Stop! Don’t pull me in!! No! I don’t want to go to hell!!”

He cried out, and with a face dyed by fear, he fell on the ground, and stopped breathing. There, the surviving Divine Knights cast aside their weapons.

“T-that’s wrong! I’m different!”
“Please forgive me! I was only following orders!”
“N-no! I don’t want to go to hell! Nooooo!!”

The fear-stricken enemy knight began to surrender, and our war was coming to its end. But after it ended, yet another war awaited.

Aura-san who became Holy Maiden.

Thelma-san and Gastone-san as her advisors.

And the war with Lorphys. Those various battles, and the aftercare…

I held up the halberd, and raised a cry of victory.

“Victory is ours!”

The surrounding soldiers raised a roar, and the enemy knights sat on the ground. About to cry, and cradling their heads.

The surrounding knights and soldiers were looking at me. In their eyes, respect, fear… various emotions were present.

And Aria approached on her horse.

“You, could you really be a Holy Knight or something? N-no, I always thought you were a little bit of a strange one, but might you possibly be a real something or another?”

… She took off her helmet, and asked with a straight face.

(… What is she even talking about?)

Epilogue

… Around the time Lyle's party was achieving victory in Zayin.

Back at Arumsaas, the two knights who had been dispatched from Lorphys stopped by Dalien's laboratory.

The one who accepted Lyle's letter of introductions,【Damien Valle】was a genius known as one of the Academy's Seven Great. A few screws in his head were just a tad bit loose, but that's what made him a Great, after all.

The other members of the Seven Great, dispersed through history, were all geniuses, but individuals with problems here and there. Damien wanted to create his perfect ideal woman, or so the pervert said, as he pressed on in his research.

In the research laboratory, maids with the same faces and clothing were carrying out cleaning, and they prepared tea for the two knights.

Damien sat on his sofa, took the letter, and extracted a small black board from it.

"He said that one was for the others."

A maid… an automaton accepted it, and put the board in her pocket. Suddenly, her red eyes began to flicker…

"… It contains data left behind by our sisters captive in the Labyrinths. The corruption is severe, and it is impossible to analyze all of it. Master, it seems that useless Monica managed to lay hands on one of the world's secrets in a Labyrinth of Beim."

Hearing that, the knights made surprised expressions. But Damien calmly sipped his tea.

"I see. I'm not really interested in that anymore. I mean, it's irrelevant to my research. But this truly is troubling."

With surprise and amazement, the knights confirmed with Damien.

“Um, troubled? You mean to say you cannot pass on Porter’s craft to us?”

Damien removed his glasses, and rubbed the inner corners of his eyes.

“Oh, I’ll teach you. It’s a bygone art already. If you drop some money by the academy, I think they’ll kind and gently teach you too. Of course, the one who formed the base for it was Lyle. It would’ve just been faster to get it from Lyle.”

The two knights exchanged glances. They seemed quite troubled. It was never even considered that Lyle was the developer.

“So then what is it that’s troubling you?”

Damien put the glasses back on, and smile.

“Lyle’s little sister Celes, you see. She’s coming to Arumsaas in the near future. No, it truly is troubling. Troublingly enough… it seems that her target is me.”

In Lyle’s letter, he had detailed the threat of Celes. He wrote it as a warning, but there really wasn’t anything that Damien could do.

So Damien stood up.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be easier to procure the necessary materials in Beim than here, right? And the academy hasn’t been feeling too great as of late. Come to think of it, maybe it’s because all the important members left for Centralle? Ahahaha, it’s just as Lyle said.”

After bursting into laughter, Damien addressed the two knights once more.

“Okay, we’re running. No. 1, No. 2, No. 3… pack up my things, we’re going to Beim. Those two are our guards.”

The maids grabbed the hems of their skirts, and lightly lifted them to curtsy.

“Very well, Master. With that, we’ll be able to fulfill Monica’s request.”

Damien tilted his head.

“Request? What did she ask for?”

The maid named No. 1 spoke.

“A design for a humanoid golem for combat, as well as the development of a golem that makes use of automaton cores. The reward is ancient technology… option slots for us. That incompetent. She said she’d toss over whatever she had duplicates of, so we had to assist her. We shall pummel her into the ground with our newly polished teamwork.”

Damien touched his hand to his chin.

“As expected of Lyle. He’s doing interesting things, I see. Right. Let’s have him take care of us. Okay, prepare to leave at once.”

When Damien said that, the maids quickly began to rush about the research lab.

“This one’ll go on the large-scale transport Porter…”
“It’s time for us to show our power.”
“Hm, leave the golem’s preliminary design to us. Master can develop the device to incorporate the cores…”

The two knights who had come all the way to Arumsaas were dumbfounded by Damien’s prompt decision to leave, and all they could do was watch…

❼

… Beim’s Eastern Guild Branch.

In it stood a robed group of two.

One of them let her light-blue hair show from under her hood.

The small and slender girl’s name was【Adele Belgi】. The girl of

seventeen had drifted from Dalien in Bahnseim to Arumsaas, to Centralle, and all the way to Beim.

The one standing to protect her from the waves of people was a tall young man. He carried his spear wrapped in a cloth, and he had a sword at his waist as well.

His weapons and build made him out as a warrior at a glance, and those around tried to avoid brushing up against hum.

His name was【Maksim Danhel】… twenty seven years old, and a former vassal knight, he had followed his feudal lord's daughter Adele for protections sake, and come with her to Beim.

The two of them took in the scenery around the East Branch.

Adele's green eyes watched the passing adventurers. When she couldn't find the one she was looking for among them, she sighed.

"As I thought, it's impossible. There are too many people in Beim."

As Adele gave up, Maksim spoke with a smile.

"We've only just arrived. Giving up won't get us anywhere, Adele-sama."

There, Adele nodded to him, and smiled. Maksim's face reddened a bit, and he scratched it with his fingertip.

"That's right. There's no doubt he is somewhere here. We have to locate him at all costs… Mr. Lyle Walt, former Wonder Child of the Walt House."

Adele's eyes narrowed.

Maksim's brow also moved a bit. His long brown hair was pushed all back at the forehead, and his red eyes took in the surroundings.

"Dalien, Arumsaas, Centralle… there's no lack of stories about him. Perhaps he's become famous here as well."

Maksim spoke as he looked around, and Adele touched her thumb to her mouth, and looked down.

“That’s what I’m hoping. Eradicating a bandit brigade in Dalien, and breaching the fortieth floor of Arumsaas’ Labyrinth with the lowest recorded numbers. The battle of brother and sister in Centralle… I really do pray he’s a good person.”

But Maksim…

“There are plenty of strange rumors around him. But it’s thinkable that he came to Beim in order to flee. What could you be expecting of such a man, milady?”

Adele looked up at the sky. She took off her hood, and let her light-blue hair out.

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, is it… no, well, I’ll follow you to the end.”

Maksim sounded tired, but Adele spoke.

“My family turned strange after meeting Celes. They should have been protesting in Centralle, but when I returned home, they suddenly wished to take part in its civil war. It’s clearly strange. I thought it would be dangerous to meet her directly. That’s why I grasped for the clues, and came all the way here…”

Adele turned her face to Maksim.

“The knights you’ve called your best of friends have been struck dead as well. Those that were once the prominent knights of Bahnseim are of no match at all. It’s as if we’re in the fairy tales of three hundred years passed.”

Adele who spoke of fairy tales let out a sigh towards the East Branch, and began walking off. Matching her small stride, Maksim followed.

“I do feel sorry, Maksim, but let’s become adventurers of Beim. Here, we can probe for information on Lyle Walt.”

To knights, at least in Bahnseim, becoming an adventurer pretty much indicated you failed in life. But Maksim smiled.

“If that is your wish, milady.”

He said that with a smile…

❼

“What the hell is this… what the hell is【Holy Knight of Judgement】supposed to mean!?”

Inside the temple of Zayin’s capital, in the room I had been afforded, I slammed both my hands on the table a number of times.

I took down the knight captain, and was waiting for the war to come to an end. That’s how it should have been, when Eva suddenly came up to me with a smile.

Eva the singer informed me of the stories she’d been telling around the capital.

“There’s also the【Blue Holy Knight】, the【Holy Knight of Love】, and the【Guardian of Miracles】. By the way, the story has two different routes for Thelma-san and Aura-san as heroines. An immoral love that crosses the boundary of age! A huge hit among middle aged woman! In Aura-san’s case, it’s just mainstream, so it’s plainly popular. I mean, the war started with only a hundred managed to take down twenty thousand.”

I watched her make a peace hand sign in delight as I pressed both my hands against my head. And the one to enter next was Clara.

“Lyle-san, the truth is there was something I wanted to ask you about.”

“What is it?”

When I turned to her with an enervated expression, she took a memo pad in hand.

“Your sentiment when you decided to recapture Zayin, and the story of where you snapped your fingers in your negotiations with Lorphys, because you knew the messenger was coming… It can’t help but

feel fictional to me no matter how I write it, so I'd like some more details on the matter. Also, I'd also like the reason you cast aside the fortress you nabbed, and decided to assault the capital."

Her eyes were sparkling, and she asked those questions with a serious expression.

But Eva.

"Hey wait! What do you mean they sound fictional! There's a splendid reason! In order to save a troubled Holy Maiden, and the people of Lorphys, he stood to his feet! Just because it sounds shady, that doesn't mean you have to twist the truth!"

Eva drew closer, and Clara raised her glasses so they caught the light. It was a little scary.

"It's all to leave records for the world to come! If you don't make proper records, then people like you will pick, choose, and modify, and come out with a completely different story in the end!"

"But it's true, isn't it!? It's fine for a Hero to move without it being for his own self-interest! It's fine if they're a fool who can't calculate loss and gain! That's a true hero!"

"That's wrong. That's definitely wrong!"

I extended my right hand, and mulled over whether to intervene in their argument, when I heard a burst of laughter from my ancestors.

The Third sounded quite pleased with my new moniker.

『Holy Knight of Judgggeeement!! How coooooool!!』

The Fourth even…

『The Blue Holy Knight, and the Holy Knight of Love… so you can't help but be bound to Holy Knight. Isn't that nice, Lyle… with this, you're officially a famous adventurer with a splendid moniker. The work will be rolling in in no time!』

… He was delighted over the money we could earn.

The Fifth spoke.

『It's better than the Idiot Son and Lyle the Burden names you got before, isn't it? But Judgement, huh… why is it that monikers that sound too proper end up ringing out as no-good instead.』

The Seventh held in his laughter.

『I-it's fine, isn't it… pff! But Guardian of Miracles, you say? Even when it wasn't a miracle, but something closer to the preparations you built up. Well, it's interesting, so approved.』

(They're enjoying this. The usual pattern, is it!?)

With those irritated feelings, I breathed out a sigh, and sat in my chair. There, both Eva and Clara turned to me.

"W-what?"

Eva spoke in a serious expression.

"So Lyle… which moniker do you want? I want to tell my tribe to spread it with that as the center. If there are a number of them, it'll get confusing."

Clara was much the same.

"Uniformity is important. Lyle-san, there's【Blue Holy Knight】,【Holy Knight of Judgement】,【Holy Knight of Love】,【Guardian of Miracles】… I think I've heard【The Holy Maiden's Holy Knight】as well. The last one comes out more in tales with romance themes. You're paired up with either Thelma-san or Aura-san."

I looked at their faces, and yelled.

"All rejected! None are to my liking! If you can come up with one I'm satisfied with, then use that!"

There, the Third let his voice from the Jewel.

『You sure are stupid, Lyle… these sorts of things are decided by what other people want to call you. You should pick a safe one while you still can.』

(… Even when there's not a single safe one among them?)

I watched Eva and Clara argue over which moniker was best, as I held my head.

❼

… Inside Zayin's temple.

In it stood the final goddess… a statue of the seventh goddess. Looking up at the goddess' image her followers had arbitrarily shaped was Novem.

Shannon was assisting beside her, while Miranda, Aria, and Monica were working on different jobs.

May had gone to deliver a letter to Lorphys, so Shannon was the only one who could help her.

They were in an important spot, and consecrated virgins were dispatched as well to clean the place.

"… Why am I cleaning? Just when I thought I was being used as bait, I was shoved into Porter, and the moment they let me out, they tell me to clean the sacred temple… no matter how hard I protest this harsh treatment I get, don't think I'll forgive you."

As she voiced her complaints, Shannon used a dust cloth to wipe down a bench. Novem wanted to caution her that her hands had stopped, but as Novem had already finished all of her own work, she couldn't really say anything about it.

When Shannon turned to Novem as she looked up at the statue of the Goddess, she was a little surprised. It wasn't even comparable to when she was with Lyle, but there was a slight fluctuation in her Mana.

Her Mana that was ever stagnant.

Shannon's eyes couldn't see, but they were fashioned with a special Skill that let her see Mana. By that, Shannon could act as if she saw just fine

(Is she angry about something? No, that's sorrow…)

And as she watched her, Novem's lips moved.

"Things like us as… gods… why did humans…"

Shannon found herself afraid of that broken voice, and she restarted her work. That moment, Novem called over to her.

What's more, before she knew it, Novem was right beside her, leaning down to match her eye level.

"Shannon-chan."

"Y-yes!"

Shannon let out a panicked voice, gathering the stares of the virgins around. But thinking she was just being scolded again, the women quickly resumed their work.

Novem was smiling. As always, her Mana was unmoving. Too little of anything.

"Once this is over, we'll have lunch, so please do your best until then."

"… S-sure."

Shannon could only nod.

(She didn't notice? Thank the Goddess.)

When she thought that, Novem offered a line.

"And please forget the words you've just heard from me. They didn't particularly hold any meaning."

The last nail of the coffin was hammered in, and Shannon nodded again, and again, and again…

❼

… Lorphys' royal castle.

May met with Alette and Lonbolt in one of its rooms.

When she handed over the letter in her possession, Lonbolt put his hand to his mouth in surprise. Perhaps Alette was curious, as she sought an explanation.

“Prime minister, how fares Zayin?”

Lonbolt wiped off his sweat, and handed off the letter to Alette. When she took it, she looked over its contents, and opened her eyes wide.

“With only… with only a hundred men, he reclaimed Zayin, you say? He really did it?”

She looked between May and the letter a few times, so May spoke.

“That’s why I said it. That Lyle brought Zayin down. So he told me to come here and see if you were moving as you’d promised.”

May didn’t sound too interested, as she munched on the snacks on top of the table.

Lonbolt spoke.

“… Attack and overthrow Selva? If it’s now, then even if forcefully, we can form the international alliance we promised. It’s not as if we have to go as far as to bring ruin to them.”

On that statement, May stuffed the final snack into her mouth, and swallowed.

“That was the plan from the start, wasn’t it? And the one that started this was Selva. While I’m at it, the ones who attacked Lyle were people of Selva, weren’t they? Honor your promise.”

May spoke in a childish voice, but Alette.

“Do you know what that means? To overthrow is…”

May tilted her head.

“Swapping out the boss, right?”

May was a quilin, and you couldn't say her thoughts were too close to humans. She only thought of wars as something of turf dispute level.

And Lyle's opinion was the Fifth, Fredricks' opinion. May owed Fredricks the debt of having saved her life.

"If you cannot move, then perhaps Lyle will move on his own. But in that case, I don't know what's to come."

Even alone, he would be able to conquer Selva. That's how she made it sound to the two of them. And in truth, with minimal manpower, Lyle had won over Zayin.

Lonbolt found that ability of his to be dreadful.

"We'll hold a meeting. We can't give a response immediately."

May stood, and headed for the window. They were on quite a high point of the castle, but regardless of that, she climbed onto it with a calm expression, before turning around.

Finally…

"Then I'll go tell Lyle you'll have a meeting."

Saying that, she leapt out.

The two watching her back thought about how they never knew how she did it, no matter how many times they watched…

❼

… As Monica cleaned, she looked at the space around her.

Destruction via magic, and a stained floor.

As she cleaned it all, a few days had already passed.

"When I'm not even taking care of that Chicken Dickwad, why is it that I have to put so much of my effort in? Recently, I haven't been able to look after him at all. I'm losing my motivation"

As unmotivated as her cleaning was, she was still a high-spec automaton maid.

Her surroundings rapidly grew cleaner and cleaner.

“I worked hard. I worked really hard this time, and yet…”

A displeased Monica was quite disappointed that she couldn’t stay at Lyle’s side. There, she saw Aura walking down the hallway.

She was surrounded by temple virgins, and taking the Holy Knight Vice-Captain Creit along.

“Good day, Monica. The weather sure is nice today.”

Creit’s sweltering smile showed that this very moment was the epitome of happiness, as he gave his greeting. There, a virgin cautioned him.

“Vice-captain, you cannot greet people as we move. Because others are meant to open a path for the Holy Maiden.”

“Is that how it is? Now that’s a pain.”

And letting out a sigh, Aura waved her hand dismissively.

“Yeah, we’re not having any of that from here on. If we’re going to break it all down, and make it up anew, we’ll need some new rules. I’ll start writing up the necessary ones later.”

As she ordered the consecrated virgins, tone aside, she was the Holy Maiden. As for clothing she was still wearing the outfit Monica made, that showed off the lines of her body.

Behind her walked Remis in handcuffs.

“Oh, are you already leaving?”

Aura nodded.

“That’s right. She’s already dead in Zayin, so it’s deportation for her. She’ll be allowed to carry an extent of her assets.”

Aura hadn’t killed Remis, but Thelma was the same. The Holy

Maiden was a decoration and a puppet. And knowing that, neither of them could take drastic measures.

But they couldn't leave her in Zayin.

The opposing faction had already been crushed, but there was no saying Remis wouldn't try a rebellion of her own. So deportation.

"You sure are kind. Though I doubt the Chicken Dickwad would kill her either. He's kind on women… if only he would be kind to me as well."

Aura looked fed-up as Monica unraveled her true feelings. And a single virgin…

"I will not allow you to speak such rude words of Knight Captain Lyle-sama… of the Holy Knight of Love!"

Monica looked delighted.

"Oh? I'd like to hear more of that in detail. The Chicken Dickhead is a Holy Knight of Love? Should I call it fitting of him, or a bit more than that… won't you tell me?"

Ignoring Monica as she drew closer, Aura walked off.

"Hey, let's go."

There, Remis spoke.

"I'll definitely make you regret this. I hated the country of Lorphys for killing my father, but now is different. Now, you're the one I hate most."

Aura answered her words with an unconcerned attitude.

"I see."

And cut it short at two words…

❼

… Inside the Jewel.

The Third looked at the Three weapons floating above the round table.

The first was a giant sword.

Then a bow.

And finally a halberd.

He extended his hand towards those silver weapons, but the Third wasn't able to touch them. It was as if they knew who their master was.

The Fourth looked at the empty chairs around the table.

『Our numbers have gone down.』

The Fifth hung his head.

『Right.』

The Seventh looked at the doors on the walls of the room. The entrance to the rooms of memories. There were now five of them.

『We only have five doors now. They've gone down yet ag… wait, what?』

Five…

The Third stood from his seat, and looked at the new door that had manifested. The chair in front of it was Lyle's.

『After this long… no, it's already been a year. It's not strange if it came out, I guess.』

The formation of Lyle's room of memories caused an outbreak of silence within the Jewel.

And the Third…

『… Want to take a peek?』

There, the Fourth, stood, and pushed up his glasses with a finger.

『You're that curious? Then there's no helping it.』

The Fifth stood as well.

『No, you look like you're all for it.』

The Seventh's seat was closest to the door, so he took the head of the charge.

『First.』

There, the Third.

『Ah, a cheap shot!』

As he scrambled forward to overtake him, the Seventh opened the door, and closed it at once. When the Third approached it in wonder, the Seventh shook his head.

『There's no such thing as fatigue here, but…』

The Fourth approached the door.

『What are you doing? Good grief… see, there's nothing… hmm? What the hell!!?』

When the Fourth opened the door with a smile, his breathing grew rough as he slammed it shut. And quietly…

『That isn't possible. Why? And this is supposed to be Lyle's room of memories. There's no way he ever met her.』

Curious, the Fifth opened the door. And he slowly closed it, and tilted his head.

『How strange. I'm sure this isn't my room, but…』

The Third couldn't understand. So he opened it himself.

There, he found a scene of the mansion he had lived in his time expanding out.

『… Eh?』

And noticing him at the doorway, a single young boy waved his hand.

『Sleigh, today we're having grandma's stew. It's a bit over

seasoned, but make sure you drink it all down without complaint. Say it's bad, and you'll make your grandma cry.』

Seeing the small boy's smile, the Third slammed the door shut.

His breathing was a mess.

『… Why is Dewey… here… this isn't my room. And I don't have a memory like that… I shouldn't have one.』

The one that appeared was the Third's deceased elder brother, a young【Dewey】.

And he had moved before him as if he were truly alive. It wasn't the set movement pattern of a simple memory.

The Third retreated back a few steps, and looked at the door.

Third, Fourth, Fifth, Seventh… the four men stood dumbfounded before Lyle's room of memories…

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